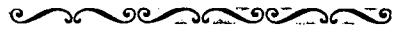






Root Out of Dry Ground



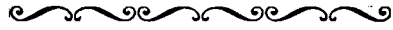
— *This Novel* —

by ARGYE M. BRIGGS

*is the winner
of the*

EERDMANS FICTION AWARD

— 1948 —



ROOT *out of*

Dry Ground

by
ARGYE M. BRIGGS

"... shall grow up before him as a tender
plant, and as a root out of dry ground..."

ISAIAH 53:2

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DEDICATED

*To the memory
of my beloved mother,*

ARGYE HOWARD McCANLIES



I

EVERYWHERE Jansie looked, it was winter. As far as the eye could see, and even past the bounds of the elastic imagination, stretched, not the cities of the earth and the inhabitants therein, but only the inevitable distances of the cold-locked Texas prairies. To the little figure that stood, in grotesque immobility, on the knoll back of the old Lewis place, the tans and browns of the scrub-oak covered plains that swelled before her were the world. Even the low buildings that huddled on the outskirts of the town behind her seemed to be there only by the indifferent sufferance of the lowering grey sky. Nowhere was there pity for the strange small creature called man, nor even a promise of hope for the impartial forgiveness of the sun of spring. Winter held the earth and the heart in a grip of impersonal cruelty.

To a possible passerby, the figure on the knoll would be just a part of the brooding tenor of the December twilight. But if such a mythical passerby, for nowhere in the dimming reaches of the landscape was there another human being in

sight, should have come near enough to gain a better view, he would have stood a moment in puzzled surprise. Then, he would have hurried away in mingled pity and loathing. For the small person on the knoll was not a child at all, but a young woman, hunchbacked and wizened and very ugly. The bitter face of suffering was in keeping with the ugly abnormality of the twisted back.

All her life, Jansie had lived with her hump and her malformed limbs, and she was accustomed to them. But to the sudden beholder, they were a shock. The thin, wiry arms, the scrawny neck above childish shoulders, seemed scarcely able to bear the heavy clumsiness of her burden.

But the eyes that peered out at the world from under tangled black bangs were strong enough to bear anything. Deep brown and deeper yet with intelligence, they brooded bitterly upon her days.

For long moments, the girl stood, balancing and glowering, watching the light of day fade out of the scene before her. Her thin brown hands, her only beautiful feature save her eyes, were jammed nervously into the pockets of her worn coat. Now and then she would shiver uncontrollably, but with a kind of indifference. It was as if she could not stop the shivering, but disdained to give attention to the physical reaction.

Even as she stood so, she sighed with a weariness that lay deeper than the flesh, and her face, unguarded, was naked to the frustrating pain of existence.

But presently, when the last vestige of light had disappeared from the sky, she turned and made her way along the half frozen mud of a footpath, across the pushed down section of a barbed wire fence and toward a sprawling grey shanty that seemed to lean with the wind.

As she came nearer to the house, she could see her stepfather silhouetted against the darkly glowing doors of the smithy where he supplemented the thin living gained from a haphazard tilling of the wornout soil of the old Lewis place. The red fire of the smithy forge was the only bright spot in a cheerless scene, and Jansie shuffled toward it with quickened

steps. As she walked, her face closed away its look of pain and settled into the sardonic matter-of-factness of its usual expression.

R. P. Sanders turned to grin good humoredly at his step-daughter, his snagged yellow teeth and straggling mustache homely in the firelight. "Going to snow?" he asked, and looked past her into the night, "Going to have a white Christmas, after all?" He had long ago lazily forgotten that this child of his wife's pitiful first marriage was not his own.

Jansie grunted an ill-natured assent and moved on past the forge toward the rickety steps that led up to the living quarters adjoining the smithy.

Her mother appeared at the top of the steps, her great bulk filling the narrow doorway. "Jansiel!" she exclaimed in a gentle whine, "I was just about to send Joey to look for you."

Annie Lewis Sanders was a blonde woman, very fat and soft and complacent. There was not a trace, except perhaps in the china blue eyes, of the shallow prettiness that had, in her youth, attracted the equally shallow interest of the dark-eyed young cowboy who had been her first husband. Now the blue eyes looked past the disconcerting dark regard below her and fastened upon the man at the forge, "You coming in at all tonight, Mr. Sanders?" she asked in a kittenish tone that set strangely upon the huge body, "It's Christmas Eve, you know."

R. P. bridled happily under the tone, not seeing the strangeness. "Be there in a minute, Annie," he answered in the brief tone suitable for the use of the male in conversation with his women-folk.

These two understood each other.

Jansie moved on up the steps and past her mother with a nervous shrug of irritation. Not that her life with R. P. and Annie was actively unhappy. In their fashion, they were kind, in the same way that they were kind to her younger half brothers, Joe and Willie.

But resentment against her affliction lay deep within the crippled girl, and some obscure pride within her rose bitterly to gag at the occasional begging trips that it sometimes oc-

casioned for the family. But R. P. was not the man to ignore the lucrative generosity of the sprawling cattle town that was the Fort Worth of 1906.

There was nothing within Jansie of the lazy acceptance of life that R. P. and Annie found so comfortable. Nor did she possess any such emotional release as R. P. found in his inept performances upon his battered old guitar, and that Annie had long ago discovered in the unrealities of the cheap love novels with which she drugged her drab days.

To Jansie, the madcap heroines of breathless loves were not so real as the scrub covered prairie that stretched about the town of Collins. And already her seventeen years had shown her the cruelty of contemptuous pity in the eyes of fellow human beings.

She hated them for it.

Mandy Lewis, Annie's father, had come to Collins from Tennessee when the tents of its claim-stakers still lined what was to be Main Street. With him, riding proud and high on the good wagon that contained their household effects, rode his wife, Tilda, who was his first cousin. And with them came the only product of their union, the china-blue-eyed, ten-year-old Annie.

Mandy took up a claim on a rocky quarter section near the townsite. There, being more prosperous than many of his neighbors who were struggling along in dugouts, he built a neat shanty with a blacksmith shop attached.

By the time Annie was eighteen, a high fronted row of small stores, a steepled church or two, and a livery stable made up the tiny metropolis of the prairies.

Tilda Lewis was a proud woman and held her head high, sometimes to the distinct discomfiture of less self-assured neighbors. So it was a real blow to her, and perhaps a secret source of satisfaction to the same neighbors, when foolish and none-too-intelligent Annie ran away and married Chuck Haines, part-time cowboy and full-time livery stable hand, who had already made for himself a name for wildness in the little town.

When Annie's husband brought her home to deposit her "for a while" and departed across the prairies in the vague direction of cattle drives and spring roundups, Tilda took cognizance of the situation that lay in her lap, and her bitterness knew no bounds.

Annie's life, in those months that preceded Jansie's birth, was one long round of denunciations and nagging. Anxious for her drifting husband, whom she loved in her own way, she bowed her head and her spirit and dumbly endured.

Then, when, with the relentlessness of nature itself, Jansie made her distressing appearance, Tilda Lewis took one look at the monstrous little creature, and, denying to herself the half-thought wish that the child would die, lifted her voice in denunciation of the father. But she was wrong, for selfish and casual as he might be, the blood that Chuck Haines had left for his child was good strong blood, flowing richly with life.

But it was all he would ever leave the helpless little being, for two months after the crippled child was born, word came to the smithy that Chuck Haines was dead, that he had been, in fact, dead before the birth of the child. The part-time cowboy, follower of roundups and cattle drives, had been killed by a falling horse, and had been buried, as so many others, somewhere on the prairie.

This was the situation, then, in the Lewis household when R. P. came along two years after Jansie's birth. He stopped his battered wagon and weary horses in the dirt road that ran alongside the smithy. There was always hope that he could trade a bottle of his patent medicine for his dinner. For the brave jingle of coin that sounded from his pocket as his nimble fingers plucked the strings of his guitar was no indication of the true state of his finances, and the fortune that he hoped to build in the cattle country was still in the future.

So it was, as his shrewd eyes took in the situation in the lean-to kitchen off the smithy, that his fertile brain saw pleasant possibilities.

Worn down by his wife's shrill jeremiads of the past two years, Mandy was not inclined to turn a deaf ear to the sug-

gestions of the medicine show owner, in spite of the fact that R. P. was a good twenty years senior to Annie's gentle twenty.

Annie herself was relieved to find a way of escape from her mother's clacking tongue, while Tilda grasped eagerly at anything that would get Jansie out of the sight of the neighbors.

As for R. P., he felt that he was getting a bargain. While not stimulating, Annie would be as complaisant a wife as a man could want, and the fact that her father's dwindling, rocky acres would some day be hers did not detract from her charms.

And, though he did not admit it, even to himself, R. P. saw possibilities in the afflicted child. Immediately after the marriage, he took his newly acquired family and set off for the cattle country farther west, ostensibly for the business of selling his wares. Only an occasional letter came back from Annie for some time, until Tilda's death two years later, in fact. Then they came home to mourn with Mandy and to stay on, Annie to keep house for the two men, and R. P. to settle relievedly into the puttering groove of farming and smithing that was to be his life from then on.

Perhaps Tilda's death was a mercy. For Annie, somewhere in the weakened moments of childbearing that came later with Willie and Joe, somewhere in one of the times when women manage to tell each other everything, by word or implication, would have given away the fact that R. P., in those hard months that had seen the gradual dissipation of the medicine show, had used Jansie as an exhibition to enhance his guitar playing. Tilda Lewis would have had to swallow the bitter draught of having to face the fact that her own grandchild had been and would again be used for the purposes of — begging.

The boys were already seated by the wood-burning cook-stove in the lean-to kitchen when Jansie came in. Willie, a big-boned thirteen-year-old with the mind of a six-year-old, was staring eagerly at the pone lying on the stove. His mouth drooled childishly at the corners.

"Wipe yore mouth, Willie!" Jansie scolded sharply.

Willie grinned and drew his shirt sleeve across his mouth.

Joe's quick ten-year-old eyes brightened at the prospect of trouble, "Willie's dumb," he told Jansie hopefully.

"Now, now, Jansie," Annie's tongue clicked reproachfully from the smithy doorway, "Don't be so sharp spoken!"

Jansie shrugged and turned away.

Sliced salt pork was swimming in milk gravy in a pan on the back of the stove, alongside a bread pan of soda biscuits. Each member of the family took a plate from the shelf in the corner and served himself from the pans.

The room in which they were eating was bright with the glow from the grilled front of the stove. Along one side of the unfinished walls, a row of iron cooking pans hung on nails, while R. P.'s guitar lay in resplendent silence on a home-made bench by the door. The scent of burning wood mingled with the indefinable smell of poverty and of food. Outside, the wind was rising, and the small panes of the room's one window rattled loosely.

Somewhere outside a hound dog gave voice to the long, wailing cry of the night.

"Somebody's going to die before morning," Annie said in her plaintive singsong voice, "It's a sure sign."

Willie rolled his eyes apprehensively and R. P. shrugged, "Just old Belle having a bad dream," he told them, and glanced over his shoulder at the dark doorway of the smithy.

Annie shook her head, unconvinced, and the eating went on in silence for a time.

Presently, R. P. stood up and, going to the smithy door, unobtrusively closed it, "There's a norther blowing up," he remarked to nobody in particular, "It's going to be awful cold before morning."

"Ummmm," Annie nodded, and there was about her big body an indeterminate air of apprehension. She shivered.

Willie sat still, his lips slack with listening, "Somebody's coming," he said slowly, "walking."

R. P. looked proudly at the boy. "Now, ain't that the limit," he said wonderingly. "I can't hear a thing, can you Annie?"

"I wish he wouldn't be so spooky about it!" Jansie snapped.

But Joe's eyes turned in quick contempt for his simple-witted brother, "I ain't scared," he said proudly. "I ain't scared of nothing."

"Hush, Joey," Annie warned, "That's jest tempting trouble to talk that way!"

Willie laughed foolishly and nodded with an air of importance, "Somebody's coming," he announced again, pleased with the attention that he was getting. "Somebody's coming—slow."

As the five of them sat, stilled with listening, a dreamy look came across Annie's broad face. "It's fate," she whispered quaveringly. "Fate approaches through the night!"

R. P. stared at his wife with a reluctant fascination and his gray mustache quivered nervously.

But Jansie, suspecting that the words came from yesterday's novel, merely shrugged with the indifference of dreary unexpectancy. "I'd better go open the door," she said in a flat voice.

Relieved to have a break in the eerie uncertainty of the moment, R. P. stood up and assumed his proper role. "I'll go myself," he announced in a fittingly deep voice. Going to the dish shelf, he took down a smoky kerosene lamp and lit it, making of the ceremony a time-consuming thing, "Probably just somebody coming to the shop for something."

But in the stillness of the room, and before the closed door to the smithy, he hesitated and his hand fell away from the latch with a kind of dread. For footsteps could be heard coming up the stair from the smithy, footsteps too light for a passing farmer, yet too slow, and somehow, too hesitating, for a borrowing neighbor. The steps paused on the other side of the door, and a fumbling hand let fall a light blow against the wood.

"Open it!" Jansie's voice snapped from behind him, and R. P. started. "Open the door," she told him again.

Her matter-of-fact tone gave him the needed push of courage.

He opened the door.



2

IN accordance with R. P.'s recent prediction, it had begun to snow. Slowly, the great wet flakes fell across the beam of light that shone from the lamp in his hand through the wide doors of the smithy. And in that beam, a face looked up at him.

For a moment, R. P. felt a return of his uneasiness. But Jansie's hand touched his arm, and her voice broke the silence. "Well, ask 'em in!"

Without answering, R. P. stood aside and held the door wider. "Come in, Ma'am," he said to the woman on the steps.

Hesitantly, but yet with a startling quickness, the woman came into the kitchen. As she moved into the room, R. P. closed the door behind her and stood staring.

"Who is it, Mr. Sanders?" Annie's plaintive query came from the corner behind the stove.

"It's a stranger, wife," he told her, and waited, his eyes on the visitor.

The woman stood shivering for a long moment, and it was as if she could not make up her mind what to do.

They studied her with puzzled eyes. She was not tall, but the dank limpness of her dark hair and shawl, the streaked wetness of her weary face, gave her a look of gauntness and of height. Great green eyes stared out of the faint remains of beauty with a frightened helplessness that was out of keeping with the unmistakable marks of a harsh worldliness that lay upon her features. Even the sweeping folds of the bedraggled cape that fell about her normally slight figure could not conceal the fact that she was bearing a child.

"It's snowing," she said in a husky voice. "We can't go on."

R. P. stood hesitating, uncertain and almost frightened by the strangeness of her scurried arrival out of the night, like a scared rabbit hunted by dogs. Even as he groped for decision, the wild lunge of the rising blizzard outside shook the little building. To send her out again in that would be cruel, but—

"We?" he asked, his face cautious.

For answer, she turned back to the door and opening it, her eyes still turned upon the group in the little room, she motioned to someone in the shadows.

And a man came slowly into the light and up the steps, his face hidden by the brim of his wet, battered hat. He carried a bundle in his hand.

When he had reached the top of the steps, a thin hand, in a gesture both clumsy and graceful, took off the hat, revealing fine dark hair and brown tired eyes. They saw that he was only a great overgrown boy, bewildered and unsure.

Annie struggled from her seat behind the stove and waddled over to the woman. "Come to the fire, dearie," she said in a cordial whine, "You look just about froze. We're mighty glad to have company."

The woman glanced sideways at the man, and made her way a bit nearer the stove, her face impassive. Then, even as they all stood watching, a wrench of pain struck her slight body, so that she jerked forward as if giving in to the force of it, and a low moan pushed between her cold-blued lips.

The man threw down his bundle and was instantly beside her, his big hands, with their long boyish wrists under too short coat sleeves, on her shoulders.

"What is it, Rose?" he demanded, "are you sick?"

Jansie, who had been staring at the scene with hard eyes, now spoke for the first time. "If you ask me," she said clearly, "They'd better be getting on their way before—"

Annie looked shocked. "But where'd they go, Jansie?" she asked, her big face soft with pity. "The poor thing's sick, ain't you, honey?"

The woman nodded, her eyes creature-like and dumb. The boy stared from his wife to the fat woman, and his throat worked childishly. "There isn't any place to go," he told them with a desperate simplicity. "We haven't any money."

Annie turned her bulk almost briskly toward the door of the bedroom beyond the kitchen. "Jansie," she commanded, "Turn back the covers of my bed, and Joey, you put a kettle of water on to heat." Then, turning to R. P., she scolded him in an indulgent tone, "Now, Mr. Sanders, you get a move on and help the lady to our bed. Then you go for the doctor. And you," she nodded to the young man, who had made a gesture of interruption, "You son, had better have something to eat. You look like you need it."

R. P. looked at the visitors, and his eyes were doubtful. But at this moment, another pain struck the woman. Seeing it, he moved beside her toward the bedroom door without further discussion.

In the bedroom, Jansie was jerking the covers of the bed into a careless disorder. Annie helped the woman, clucking softly as she uncurled the clutching fingers from the folds of the cape. "My, my," she said softly, "Your poor little hands is all swollen! Look at that," and she held up the hand to show Jansie the great, unhealthy roll of flesh that clutched the wedding band on the woman's finger with a deep constriction. "That ain't right," she said in a worried voice.

The woman struggled out of the absorption of a submerging pain, and laughed, not pleasantly, "We've walked all the way from Fort Worth," she told Annie.

Annie stared at her. "But why, in your condition, did you walk so far?"

The man answered her from the doorway of the bedroom, where he had been standing. "We had to walk," he told Annie in a sick voice. "The carnival we was with went broke at Fort Worth, and I was trying to get her back to a cousin of hers. She wanted it."

The woman shivered suddenly. "I was afraid," she said simply. "I wanted to go somewheres else."

Annie knelt and worked the worn, sodden shoes off icy feet. "Well, honey," she said slowly, "you shouldn't of tried it."

The woman looked about her without answering. Joe was lounging in the doorway, intrigued with the excitement but with a too-knowing look on his freckled face. Willie sat hunched in a corner, where he had esconced himself with the remains of his supper pone. Jansie, her thin face set with disapproval of the whole proceedings, shuffled about the room, grudgingly setting it to rights.

A flare of anger blew across the eyes of the woman. "Hadn't them kids better get out of here, Jim?" she demanded, nodding toward the boys.

Surprised, Annie gestured vaguely in the direction of the kitchen. "You boys better run along," she said mildly. "This ain't no place for any of you to be. You get the man some supper, Joey."

Reluctantly, Willie drifted through the doorway, baffled at being cheated of so interesting an event, while Joe, scornful to show disappointment, shrugged, and glanced at the visitor, stomped out, his hands in his pockets.

The man followed the boys, his eyes frightened and tired, while Jansie sat down in a chair, her face impassive, waiting to be needed.

Pleased to be relieved of the curious regard of the boys, the woman dropped back against the cotton pillow on the bed, and looked about her. The room was chill with the draughty gusts of the blizzard, and not even the tolerant glow of the lamp could hide the fact that it was none too clean.

But it was shelter, and that was a great good. Then, there were the fat woman's fumbling kind ministrations, a much needed supper for Jim, and there was a doctor coming. At least, the old man had gone for one. But as she considered the house about her, she found herself doubting the possibilities of his coming. No self-respecting physician would come out on a night like this to such a house.

"We're the Sanders family, dearie," Annie was speaking in a graciously elegant tone that she felt was suited to the unusual occasion, "And we're glad you folks come to us, Mrs.—" she paused on a note of inquiry.

The woman pushed back the damp strands of her hair and bit her lip, trying desperately to smile. "Mrs. Young," she said slowly. "Jim'll tell you all about—" Then, as the thing that was happening to her struck with all the force of its accumulated power, she writhed in threatened convulsion.

Even Jansie's cool dark eyes grew frightened, as Annie screamed for the husband and clutched the suffering woman. She shuffled about, trying to execute Annie's frantic commands, half stumbling over the man's booted feet as he knelt beside his wife.

Going presently into the lean-to kitchen, in one of the infrequent lulls in the woman's agony, she found the boys huddled together by the stove, awed by the rising fury of the storm outside and the cries from the bedroom. Willie, bewildered and deeply troubled in his simple soul, began to sniffle. Jansie hushed him sharply. "Shut up, you Willie!" she commanded in a grating whisper. "You shut up. You hear me."

Cowed by her vehemence, Willie struggled to control his dismay. But the power of the blizzard and the rising crescendo of the thing that was happening in the bedroom were too much for his elemental nature. He could bear it no longer. And with each wail of pain that came from the bedroom, Willie threw back his head and howled.

Hardly less horrified than Willie at the recent turn of events, R. P. was having his troubles on the road to the doctor's home. Hoping to avoid the drifted boardwalks of

the main street, he had cut across a field on the outskirts of the town, then had turned into a lane leading to the doctor's house. Crossing the field, he had not met the full force of the storm, but in the lane he faced the north wind in all its violence. The snow was slanting to the ground in hissing sheets, while the barbed wire fence along the lane sang under the nervous fingers of the gale.

R. P. hesitated as the blast of the storm hit his face, but driven by the prospect of having to deliver the woman's baby himself, he trudged on. He'd rather risk freezing!

At the Smalling's door, he pounded with a force born of desperation, then drew a sigh of relief as a lamp glowed in the window of the parlor.

The doctor's wife opened the door.

"Is Doc Smalling to home?" shouted R. P.

Mrs. Smalling peered out into the night with a puzzled face. "Why, yes," she told him. "The doctor's here. Come inside, please."

R. P. looked longingly at the glowing stove in the corner of the cheerful room, then jerking off his cap, stepped just inside the door.

"Why, it's Mister Sanders!" Mrs. Smalling's face showed her surprise. She sometimes bought a load of scrub wood from the old man. "Is someone sick at your house?" she asked kindly.

R. P. shook his head, wondering how much to tell a lady like Mrs. Smalling. "They's a baby coming," he said modestly. "I'd like to get Doc to come along with me, if he's willing."

Mrs. Smalling led the way to the doctor's office-study, and opened the door. "Mr. Sanders wants to see you, Jack," she told her husband, and motioned R. P. forward.

It was a pleasant room, and matched the man who sat under the green shaded lamp at the desk. His brown beard and quiet clothes gave him the air of dignity that he felt was essential to his profession, but he was a young man, still in his early thirties. Long, sensitive hands lay on the shining wood of the desk, on which lay an open book.

He turned tired brown eyes at the entrance of the visitor.

R. P. stood turning his disreputable cap in dirty hands before the quiet appraisal in the doctor's eyes.

"What is it, R. P.?" asked the doctor.

"I — that is — there's a woman down to our house having a baby, Doc," R. P. told him, "And I'm wondering if you'll come help us out."

Doctor Smalling looked surprised. "But who is having a baby at your house, R. P.?" he asked. "Not Annie?"

A slight movement of his mustache showed that R. P. was smiling. "No, sir, not Annie," he agreed. "A couple just come in off the road tonight. They wasn't no other place for them to go, so we took them in."

The doctor looked irritated. "Then why—" he began, then paused. "Are you sure she's in labor?"

R. P. drew down the corners of his mouth with a wry twist, "I'm sure," he said simply.

At this moment, the door opened and Mrs. Smalling came in. "Are you going out again tonight, Doctor?" she scolded. "There's a bad blizzard."

"There's a — er — a strange woman having a baby at the Sanders' house." Doctor Smalling's eyes twinkled across the desk at his wife. Standing up, he reached for the bag that stood ready on a table nearby.

Mrs. Smalling, frowning in refusal to be beguiled, turned to R. P. "Are you sure she's in labor, Mr. Sanders?"

R. P. looked exasperated at her lack of delicacy. "I'm sure," he said crossly, and then, as Mrs. Smalling kept waiting, "She's bad took."

Mrs. Smalling smiled at her husband. "Then if she's bad took, I suppose you'd better go, Jack."

Smiling back at her, the doctor took his wraps from the hall tree in the corner and followed the bundled figure of R. P. out into the storm.

The snow was drifting in dry fluffs against the outer walls of the smithy as the two men turned the corner of the house.

"It's getting colder," Doctor Smalling looked up into the opaque whiteness of the air and followed R. P. through the wide doors.

R. P. closed the doors behind them, and as they walked up the steps in the half-light, a pandemonium of sounds, hitherto muffled by the roar of the storm, burst upon them.

"What in the world is that?" asked the doctor.

R. P. shrugged and led the way into the lean-to. "That's jest Willie howling, I reckon. The woman must've got him all wrought up."

Doctor Smalling paused in the doorway of the kitchen and stared about him. The dingy room with its firelight falling on the howling boy in the corner, the roar of the storm outside, and from the bedroom that recurrent rise and fall of sound, all combined into a sense of weird unreality. Jansie stood, witch-like and impassive, beside the bedroom door, and her black eyes were inscrutable on the doctor.

R. P. established himself with his back to the glowing stove and jerked his head toward the faded print curtain over the bedroom doorway. "It ain't fit for me to go in there, Doc, unless you need me," he explained.

Doctor Smalling glanced at Jansie, then raised the curtain and drooping his head a little to get under the door-frame, went in. Just inside the doorway, he paused, and Jansie slipped past him into the room.

Annie half lay across the quilts, clutching the suffering visitor in her arms, her broad face a study in sympathy and vicarious pain. The husband sat beside the bed, his face blank with weariness and grief.

Annie turned as they came in. "Oh, Doctor," she gave a wail of relief, "I'm glad you've come. I think the poor thing is dying."

The woman rolled terrified eyes toward the doctor, but she was long past coherent speech. Even in the icy room, great drops of the sweat of suffering poured down her face.

Setting his bag beside the smoking lamp on the table, Doctor Smalling went to Annie and gently disengaged the clutching arms. "Here, here, now," he scolded impassively, "You just go into the other room and rest." His glance roamed quickly about the room and fell on Jansie's expres-

sionless face. "Maybe you'd better help me," he told her in a low tone. "The father isn't going to be any good, either."

Jansie smiled bleakly. "I'll get them both out of here and come back and help. I won't get all wrought up," she agreed in a cold voice.

When the three had left the room, the doctor looked at the woman, and knew that she was in a bad way. There was no doubt of it.

Then, for a moment, as he looked about the cold, dim, dirty little room, he knew an unreasoning dread, but shaking himself into a better frame of mind, he took off his coat and rolled up the gartered sleeves of his clean white shirt.

"I'll have to have warm water," he told the girl when she came back. "And tell R. P. he'd better help." Then as she turned toward the door, he added dryly, "And tell him to scrub his hands — with soap!"

In the hours that followed, he had no more time to consider his surroundings. The roar of the wind outside, the quiet comings and goings of the hunchbacked girl, the occasional yelp from a somewhat subdued Willie, all seemed to mingle into a confused background for the desperate battle that was being waged in the dirty bed. That battle was the only reality in an unreal world.

The child was born at two o'clock of the bitter Christmas morning. It was a girl. Doctor Smalling gave it into the brown hands across from him with only the most necessary attention.

"Take her to the fire," he said and his eyes were watching the figure on the bed. "She seems strong enough."

Jansie took the strangely scrawny, naked little being into her long hands, and stood for a moment looking down at her.

The doctor glanced up from his work at the bed. "Tend to her Jansie," he said sharply. "Get a move on you, girl!"

Jansie looked at him with bemused dark eyes, her face piteous. "She's perfect, Doctor," she said slowly, "Her little body is perfect!"

With the "strong enough" baby out of the way, the fight went on. But even as he fought, the doctor knew its hope-

lessness. The odds were too long for death. He knew, by now, some of the circumstances of her coming, and he knew, too, that death had already marked her for his own long before she had begun the walk that was to end here in this humble place.

It was four o'clock when at last the doctor came out of the bedroom. He stood in the doorway, the curtain held back in his hand, and his face was drawn with the losing battle of the night.

Jansie was sitting by the fire, the baby, wrapped in a torn scrap of old blanket, in her lap. Her eyes were looking into the depths of the stove, but one long hand gently stroked the faded folds of the blanket. Willie lay asleep in the corner by the stove, and Joe was sprawled across the floor at Jansie's feet. Annie dozed by the kitchen table, her face puffy with tears.

Footsteps behind him in the bedroom told the doctor that R. P. and the husband were coming, bringing the lamp, and he moved on into the kitchen.

At the sound of his steps, Annie roused. "How is she, Doctor?" she asked plaintively. "How is the poor thing?"

The doctor shook his head, and R. P., his arm around the bowed shoulders of the husband, spoke from the doorway. "She's gone, Annie."

Annie sighed loudly. "Poor thing!" she said respectfully. "God rest her soul."

Jansie did not look up.

Doctor Smalling stood for a moment, his brows drawn down in thought, then turned to the husband. "I can't tell you how sorry I am," he said simply, and thought, even as he spoke, how terribly young the boy seemed to be. He wondered briefly about the history of this strange marriage so sadly ended. "Can we help you make some arrangements for taking care of the baby, and—"

The young husband shook his head in miserable puzzlement. "I've no place to take the baby," he said slowly, as if trying to learn some strange lesson, "And no money to—"

The doctor cleared his throat, "Don't worry about money, son. I guess there are enough people to chip in a little to see that she is buried properly. But now, the baby is another matter." He turned to Annie. "Could you keep her for a few days, Annie, just till we can get a place for her to stay?"

At his words, Jansie's head jerked up and her dark eyes blazed at him with such fury that the doctor was startled. "Don't you dare take my baby away!" she said hoarsely. "She's mine! I'm going to keep her."

Doctor Smalling glanced at the young husband and moved uncomfortably. "Now, Jansie," he said soothingly, "You can't take care of a tiny baby."

"She's mine!" Jansie clutched the bundle to her thin breast. "She's mine."

Annie smiled comfortably and reaching over, tucked the blanket more securely about the tiny form. "She's a mighty sweet little baby, Doc," she told him, "And if her poor paw is willing, we'd like to keep her and give her a home."

Doctor Smalling was somewhat reassured by Annie's placid tone, but his face was troubled. "He mustn't decide now," he told them. "He is too dazed with grief. Only time will show him whether or not he wants to let you have her to bring up. We'll talk about it again, soon."

R. P. looked pityingly at the numb young face across the room, and glanced toward the bedroom door. "Well, Doc, and you too, son," his voice was important. "If you decide to leave her here, we'll treat the poor little thing like she was our own."

Annie bent her bulk above the little form in Jansie's lap, and glanced up at Jim Young. "What do you want to name the little thing, Mister?" she asked gently. "She ought to have a name, surely."

"Rose," he answered and his voice quavered and broke. "Name her Rose."

Annie smiled. "She was born on Christmas morning, bless her little heart!"

And at her words, the strange, wild night was past, and morning lay about them.

“She was born on Christmas morning,” Annie went on, while her eyes were coaxing the young father to notice his child. “Name her for her poor mother and name her for the day. Call her Christmas Rosel”

Jansie said nothing, but her eyes were deep as she brooded above the sleeping form of the baby.



3

BUT day followed slow day in the house and smithy. Rose Young was buried and the flowers on her grave, put there by pitying neighbors, had long since withered, and still Jim Young drifted, like some broken thing, detached and courteous. He lived off the Sanders' poverty with complete indifference, taking no interest whatsoever in his child.

Jansie watched him with quick anxious eyes.

It was only after a casual meeting with Doctor Smalling that he roused to any action at all.

"Doc Smalling says I have to get out," he told R. P. one day as he was desultorily helping the old man in the smithy, "Got to get to a higher drier climate. Lungs."

Jansie, who had been working in the kitchen at the top of the steps, came to the open door, to ask, before R. P. could answer, "What you going to do with the baby?"

Jim Young looked listlessly up at the dark face peering through the dimness of the smithy. "You can have her,

Jansie," he said simply. "I can't take care of her."

"To keep?" demanded Jansie, mercilessly.

Jim Young's thin lips twisted in a tired smile. "Yes, to keep, for always. Call her Sanders. The Youngs are about gone, and she ought to have folks."

It was only then that Jansie allowed herself a belated pity. "I'm sorry you have to be sick," she said slowly, as the import of his words got through her absorption in gaining the child. "It's hard, I reckon."

Jim Young glanced at her. "Don't worry too much about me, Jansie," he said coolly, "You've got the kid."

Within a day or so, he was gone.

As Jansie watched him walk away from the smithy, stopping now and then to rest, and cough, there was within her a vague sense of guilt, a pang of pity through her satisfaction, for she knew that the child was truly hers, now, forever.

In the months that followed the coming of the baby, her lengthy name was soon comfortably shortened to Chris. The major portion of her care fell upon Jansie's willing shoulders, for Annie, in spite of her flowery protestations of affection for the child, was quite willing to leave to the crippled girl such monotonous matters as clean clothes and proper food. Annie was willing to rock the baby to sleep now and then, as it warmed her heart to feel the tiny body pressed against her great bosom, but Jansie did the work.

And as Jansie knew very little about babies, or even about the most elemental practices of infant care, the fact that Baby Chris not only managed to stay alive, but even thrived lustily, was a telling comment upon the life-sustaining properties of sunshine and fresh air.

Every facet of the attention of the crippled girl was fastened upon the child. As the months passed, the baby came to look to Jansie for existence itself. Her eyes would watch for the wizened dark face and would light up when it came into view. When she learned to walk, Baby Chris toddled about behind the shuffling, hunched form with all the persistence of a small shadow.

That is, until, as she grew older and more self-confident, Baby Chris decided to go exploring.

The wide-open doors and the hot-weather freedom of her second summer were an almost irresistible allurement to wandering. Jansie would look up from her work in the chicken yard or garden to see the small figure disappearing from sight over the swell of the prairie, or darting down the pathway toward town.

"One good spanking would settle that youngun," R. P. would drawl irritably as Jansie would patiently lay down her hoe to give chase.

"Well, she ain't going to get no whipping," Jansie would mutter darkly, half to herself, as her hunched shuffling form would take out after the already amazingly agile little body. "She's too little to be whipping on, and nobody ain't going to do it, neither!"

And she set herself the task of watching Chris closely enough to keep her at home, which task was complicated by the revival meeting that was held, that second August of Chris' life, in a brush arbor on an open flat near the old Lewis place.

R. P.'s untrained musical ear was fascinated by the too-regular rhythm of the loud gospel songs. He would drift over to the arbor in the long summer twilights and squat beside the Negroes on the grass just outside the circle of lights. Willie and Joe would sometimes come to lie nearby on the warm ground, and Baby Chris learned to toddle after them, her eyes and ears entranced by the shouts and colors of the noisy assemblage.

To the suggestion that they, too, go along to see the fun, Annie and Jansie turned deaf ears for different reasons. To Annie the prospect of bed was more alluring than even the vicarious excitement of watching the mourners, while to Jansie, the very idea of exposing herself to the coaxing exhortations of the preacher was abhorrent. There was within her an unreasoning fear of the very sound of the sonorous voice.

"What'd I want to traipse over there for and listen to them shout?" she would demand in a contemptuous tone. "Just to let 'em look at me, maybe?"

So the others would go on without her.

But there was no attraction for R. P. in the less colorful morning services. The music was subdued, being only the quiet singing of a few devout women and the preacher. And there were no shoutings and exhortations, there being no sinners to coax in. These morning services for the edification of the faithful held little charm for idle curiosity.

But Baby Chris was not so discriminating. When, one clear blue morning in the second week of the revival, she heard the sound of singing coming across the intervening prairie from the arbor, she promptly lost interest in the mud pies with which Jansie had established her by the back steps. Struggling laboriously onto her chubby legs, she wobbled toward the pleasant sounds.

When, presently, Jansie looked out the open back door to find the baby gone, she gave a sharp exclamation of irritation. There was little real danger within a radius of a mile of the shanty, but it was troublesome to have to stop her work and go hunt the little girl.

She hurried outside to shade her eyes and look toward the knoll, but there was no sign of a tiny, blue-aproned figure. She swung around to peer down the path to town, but Chris was not there. Then, almost reluctantly, Jansie brought her eyes toward the arbor, and saw, with an unreasonably sinking heart, a flash of blue just as it disappeared into the shadow beneath the brush top. Bracing herself with muttered irritation, she stalked in that direction. There was no one to send, for R. P. was in town and the boys had gone fishing, while to expect Annie to move her bulk out into the heat would be laughable. She dared not trust Chris to come home of her own accord.

The peace of a summer morning lay across the prairie and hovered about the small, hunchbacked figure as she hurried down the path toward the arbor. Somewhere a meadowlark lifted his voice in happy articulation of the blessing of

summer, while here and there small flowers struggled up from the pebbled earth, their tiny faces naive under the bored shadow of the sturdy sage.

But Jansie plodded on, her head down. What did it matter if the sun shone and the world gleamed fair? It wasn't Jansie's world, anyway. It belonged to the tall, loud-voiced, whole people who stomped about, possessing the earth and everything in it, and pausing now and then to gaze with a wondering and hateful pity at her affliction. No, it wasn't Jansie's world!

When she came to the arbor, she stopped just outside the circle of shade and looked toward the meeting that had convened on the first two or three rows of benches. A wall of plump backs sat listening to the rolling cadences of the preacher who stood before them, book in hand. Jansie's lips twisted in scorn for the earnest-looking little man with the long hairs carefully brushed across his bald spot, who stood sonorously expounding to the willing ears before him.

Chris sat firmly among the flock, right on the front bench, her blue apron bright against the yellow of the rough pine planking, and her curls stilled for once in the completeness of her fascination with the speaker. Jansie shifted her feet and tried to catch the baby's eye. But Chris kept her face turned toward the low platform.

Jansie looked around, not wanting to go home without the child, and yet not daring to go down the aisle and expose herself to the familiar pity of curious eyes.

Presently, she sat down on the edge of the last bench, her temper smoldering. Within her there was an increasingly deep determination to ignore the unctuous voice of the evangelist.

But the little man was handling something bigger than himself, and Jansie found herself forgetting the self-important tone in the meaning of the unaccustomed words. For the preacher was reading, his voice slow on the words, about a Man: "He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him—"

Jansie wondered who the other ugly person could be.

“‘He is despised and rejected of men;’” the homely voice unconsciously softened on the most beautiful of words, “‘a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from Him —’”

Jansie raised her head and stared at the speaker, surprise turbulent within her. Why, she knew how that felt! Hadn't she watched so many heads turned away in the quick, embarrassed skimming-glance of pity and disgust?

Who was this Man?

“‘Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows—’”

Surely no one had ever borne her griefs nor cared when she cried, Jansie thought grimly. She'd had to go it alone.

Poor man, if he had to carry her load.

“‘We have turned every one to his own way—’”

A wave of shame went through Jansie, shame that this One should have borne her griefs and carried her sorrows, and then have been rejected.

I don't reckon I ever meant to turn away myself, she thought humbly, I just didn't know!

And at least one heart within the range of the little preacher's voice ached with the realization of that burden of sorrow and bitterness that had been thrust upon innocent shoulders.

I've hated everybody and everything, she thought with a growing realization of the personal character of this thing, and here the preacher was saying that her meanness had made it harder on the Man!

“‘He was oppressed and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth—’”

And Jansie, remembering a thousand harsh tirades against life itself, knew shame.

The preacher thumbed a page or two and went on reading. He was tired this morning and not too well prepared, and he was marking time with Scripture.

“‘Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat—’”

The penniless girl on the back bench knew how arid had been the thirsty reaches of her own soul.

Who was this Man, who could offer so much?

“—hear, and your soul shall live—”

Jansie's head was sunk now between her hunched shoulders, and within her, there was all confusion and bewilderment. Shame mingled in her heart with a timid hope, and questions rushed through her like a wind unseen but strong.

I'm so mean, she thought humbly, always a-quarrellin' and a-makin' trouble.

The little preacher could not stall with Scripture much longer. He wished fervently for one of the flowery, pulpit-pounding sermons that he usually brought out, but, somehow, this morning, he just wasn't up to it.

He stepped forward on the jerry-built platform, “Folks, that there Scripture is talking about Jesus, the Son of God,” he said simply, “He is offering salvation to just any sinner that will take it, out of the mercy of His love.”

Jesus!

So that was the Man. In all her life, Jansie had never heard that name except in ridicule or careless expletive, and now here was the preacher telling her that He was the Man who was offering her so much.

I reckon though, she thought with a new humility, I reckon He wouldn't want to be bothered with the likes of me.

And out of the impressions invoked by the words she had heard read and the beginning music of the invitation song, she was forming in her heart a picture of the Man Jesus.

Pitying eyes, patient and understanding, understanding even a bitter, tempestuous, hunchbacked girl.

“‘Incline your ear, and come unto me—’” said the voice of the preacher above the music.

Reaching hands of tenderness and help.

“Why do you wait, dear brother—” sang the untrained nasal voices of the women, and their thoughts were upon the finished housework at home.

Jansie stirred, her face anxious, and looked toward the little preacher. What was he saying?

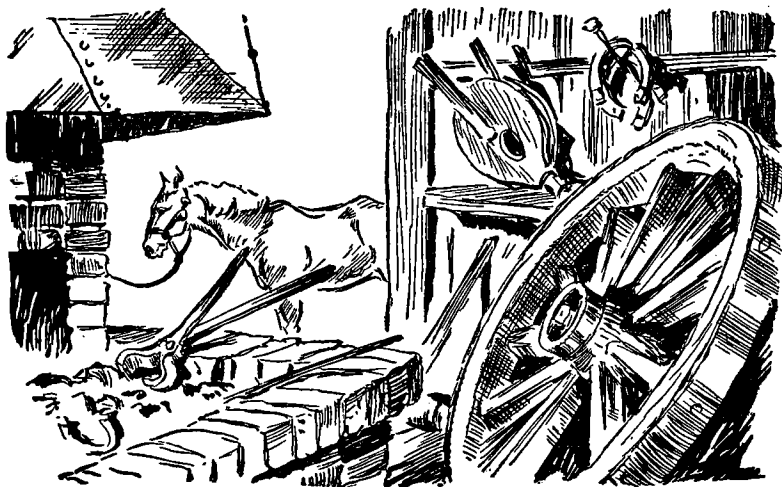
"Come, give me your hand, my friend, if you will accept this Jesus as your Saviour. Come and kneel at the feet of Jesus."

"Whyee not, whyee not, why not come to Him noooow—" sang the women.

Then their eyes grew soft with responsive emotion, and the face of the little preacher lit up with a startled joy.

For the crippled girl had tumbled down the sawdust-sprinkled dirt of the aisle, to fall to her knees before the rough pine planking of the mourner's bench.

Jansie was not alone anymore.



4

CHRIS lay on her cot by the kitchen stove and dreamily scratched at her shoulder. She knew that it was morning, though she had not yet opened her eyes, for somewhere a rooster was crowing through the rising day. The sound made Chris homesick for something, and a hurting, yet delightful nostalgia pressed into her stomach. It was like the times when Annie read aloud some of the nicest words in her books. They gave you a wiggly feeling in your insides.

There was a lazy yawp from the shop, where Joe and Willie slept near the forge, and Chris could hear them begin the usual morning argument about who was going to get up and make the fire. Joe would do it, of course, as he did every morning, for Joe knew that it had to be done, whereas Willie would just grin stupidly and lie there all day. He didn't care whether they had a fire or not, Willie didn't. Chris' babyish lips pouted with contempt, for already, at five years old, she knew very well that she was smarter than Willie. Willie was dumb.

Presently, just as she had expected, Joe came in. She watched him between barely slitted eyelids as he poked at the ashes of last night's fire. Over in her cot by the table, Jansie was stirring, and Chris knew that she was dressing under the cover of her quilts. The thought of Jansie's hunched back squirming about under the quilts troubled Chris and she opened her eyes to banish it.

Joe had the fire going now, and the glow made golden pictures on the dark stain of the rafters overhead. Chris snuggled a little lower in the warm nest of her cot, and watched the grotesque shadows move across the wall as Jansie shuffled from stove to table and back again. After a while, the delicious smell of frying pork mingled with the scent of strong, cheap coffee and the mysterious odors of the dawn.

Willie shuffled in from the shop, scratching at his head and grinning foolishly.

"Get some wood, Willie. We're nearly out." Jansie stood at the cookbench pouring flour into the wooden bread bowl. "I can't cook breakfast if I don't have no wood." Her black eyes were alert about the room. Without seeming to notice Chris in particular, she ordered, "Get up, now, Chrissie. Get up and hand me the skillet."

Chris eased reluctantly out of the warmth of her cot and stood huddled by the stove, her legs gleaming in the light from its gratings. Shivering, she tried to cover them with the skimpy length of her faded calico dress, but after a bit, warmed, she straightened and stood scratching absently, listening to the bubbling sound made by the boiling coffee in the smoked pot on the stove.

Willie came in with an armload of wood, and with a mischievous sidelong look, dumped the load near Chris' feet. He giggled delightedly when the little girl started at the crash. Jansie glanced over her shoulder, her black eyes sharp for a moment, but when she saw that Chris was not hurt, she turned back to her biscuit-making without speaking.

Disappointed at not getting more reaction, Willie shuffled his big eighteen-year-old body around in front of Chris to get her attention.

"You, Willie!" Jansie's voice broke in on his maneuvers and her wizened face was sharp, "You get those chips off that floor! Don't you go messing things up, you!"

Muttering, Willie fumbled at the chips scattered about on the floor, then sitting down, he punched dreamily at the fire.

Chris moved away from him.

The door opened and Joe came in, reeking of skunk.

"Wheewwww!" Chris squealed delightedly, "You must've caught something, Joe! You stink awful!"

Joe's sullen freckled face grew a shade less somber in response to the brightness of her words, but he shrugged indifferently. "It ain't much good. Getting too late for good pelts."

"I'm gonna get my old shotgun and get me some rabbits," Willie shouted importantly, "Gonna get me a good old cottontail."

Jansie looked pleased, for Willie was a good shot. "You get us a cottontail, and I'll fry it," she promised.

Joe ran his hands through his tangled, sandy hair, and threw back his head in a nervous gesture. "I wish I could get enough money to get me a French harp," he muttered.

The curtain across the bedroom doorway lifted as Annie came in, rubbing her eyes and yawning widely. "My! Ain't I the lazy one?" she said happily. "I don't know when I've slept better!"

The four stared at her without speaking, but without ill humor. They just stared. R. P. came out behind his wife, also yawning.

Jansie slapped the last of the big soda biscuits into the bread pan. "Here, Chris, you get these into the stove," she told the little girl.

Chris obediently lifted the pan and thumped it into the low oven. "There," she whispered, "They'll cook there, won't they, Eva?"

Jansie, who was rolling little wads of dough from her hands into the mixing bowl, glanced over her shoulder. "What's that you said, Chris?" she asked sharply.

Chris drooped her green-flecked hazel eyes to the dancing flame-picture in the stove. "Nothing," she muttered.

Jansie frowned and walked over to peer down at the little girl. "Now, you listen to me, Chris," she said quietly, but her dark eyes were anxious, "You stop that talking to— to—" she hesitated for a word, "To yourself. It ain't healthy," she finished lamely.

Chris kept her eyes on the fire. "I was just playing," she complained innocently. "I wasn't talking to myself atall."

Jansie stood for a troubled moment, uncertain as to the reason for her own anxiety, then turned away, defeated.

Blandly unconscious of any troubled mood, Annie waddled over to Chris and stood patting the soft dark curls. "She's Annie's sweetie pie," she murmured lovingly. "Annie loves little Chrissie."

She settled into her rocking chair.

R. P. looked pleased, but did not smile. The family waited in silence for the biscuits to cook. Willie hummed under his breath with a vacant happiness, while Joe scowled and scraped the dirt from his fingernails with his pocketknife.

Annie rocked.

Presently, Jansie opened the oven door and pulled out the pan of biscuits. They were done, so, using the edge of her skirt for protection to her hand against the hot pan, she carried it to the table. There she set it down on the bare wood.

"Breakfast's ready," she stated briefly. "Pull up and eat."

Chris took a stool to the table and watched as Jansie poured coffee and hot water into one of the thick, white cups and sweetened it, then broke two biscuits into the liquid. "There." She set the soft mess in front of the little girl. "There, now, Chrissie, there's your breakfast."

Chris smiled, and still watching the food, folded her small hands and waited.

Jansie looked slowly about the table, and there was a long pause. Annie spoke. "Come on now, boys," she said in a placating tone, "you bow your heads."

Willie obediently lowered his head, still chewing, but R. P. looked irritated, and Joe's light eyes grew sullen. "We've always eat all right," R. P. stated for the thousandth time. "I ain't holding with praying ever' time we set down."

It had been this way ever since that day three years ago, when Jansie had come home from the brush arbor.

"We'd ought to do something to — sort of show —" she had suggested gropingly to the somewhat puzzled Annie, "We'd ought to be different, somehow —"

But though puzzled, Annie had been agreeable. "I reckon we could say thanks at the table," she had suggested vaguely. "I've seen folks do that."

But she hadn't remembered any words, so it had been up to Jansie to grope her way to her own interpretation of grace for meat.

"It's fitting." Annie said now, and her tone was conciliatory. "So you boys just bow your heads. Go ahead, Jansie."

And even R. P. reluctantly lowered his shaggy thatch.

Jansie closed her eyes and raised her face. "Thank you, God," she remarked conversationally, "for something to eat. God bless us. Amen."

Benignly, Annie patted Chris' head. "There now, that's the way to raise us up a little girl!"

Chris reached for a slice of salt pork and sat nibbling at it while she waited for the coffee to soak into the bread in her cup. She pressed her firm little teeth into the crunchy lean of the meat and avoided the underdone fat. Across the table from her, R. P. hunched over his food, shovelling it in with a speed that seemed to be in effort to make up for the time used in the saying of grace. Chris turned her eyes away. Somehow, it made her not want to eat herself when she watched Paw eat. Looking away, she swung her bare legs and curled her feet around the rung of the stool. She reached for a spoon from the cluster in the glass in the middle of the table, and began eating the soaked bread with dainty, nibbling bites.

When R. P. had finished his eating, he stood up and stretched luxuriously. "I got to shoe a horse for Mister Bolger today," he announced proudly. Then turning to Joe, he

added, "You get done eating and come right on out and help me, Joe. You hear?"

Joe went on chewing in sullen indifference, and R. P. glared at him, then turned away.

"I'll help you, Paw," Chris offered, leaning across the table to smile at the old man. "I'll come out and help you."

R. P. looked at the clear hazel-green eyes and the soft dark curls, and his mustache twitched gently. "That's right, you come along and help Paw! You can blow them bellows for me!" And pleased with his own teasing, he shambled out to the smithy.

The day was broad awake when Chris came down into the smithy. She stood breathing in the familiar incense of a black-smith shop, which is a mingled smell of burnt leather, sizzling hot iron and scorching hooves. R. P. and a neighbor were arguing politics in desultory shouts above the din of R. P.'s hammer. Chris listened to the uninteresting conversation for a moment, then, careful to keep her lips hidden, she whispered, "Come on, let's go!" and reaching a hand to the invisible Eva, she slipped through the wide doors of the smithy into the glitter of the spring morning.

The east threw long streamers of light through the scrub oaks across the road, and into the unfenced yard of the smithy. Chris winced as the gravel of the pathway bit into her still winter-tender feet. In a few days, her feet would be toughened again and she could walk on gravel without noticing it, but now it hurt.

She strolled aimlessly past the piled junk, the worn-out wagon tires, the broken wheels and bits of scrap iron in the yard, and on out to where Annie's scrawny chickens exulted in the newly turned soil of the garden patch. Chris sniffed the exciting smell of newly turned earth, "Don't it smell nice?" she whispered to Eva.

She paused to watch Daisy, R. P.'s nondescript horse, fascinated by the deep crunching of the big yellow teeth and the loud snuffing breaths of the grazing animal.

To the right of the spot on which the little girl stood dreaming, the town stretched away from the smithy. Here and there,

along the rutted country lane, small fields and patches of woodland showed where some suburb-dwelling farmer, like R. P. himself, still clung to his country ways. To the left, Chris could see the low blue of distant hills, with the scrub covered prairie rolling between.

She'd once asked Annie about those hills.

"They're the Far Blue Mountains, honey," the fat woman had assured her. "That's what *I* call them, the Far Blue Mountains."

And so to Chris, they were the Blue Mountains, forever after. No snowcapped peaks of later years could ever hold for her the illusory glory of those Blue Mountains rising a little above the gentle swells of the Texas prairie. What did it matter that the years proved them to be merely low, dusty, treeless mounds? The treeless mounds were not the Blue Mountains. For the Blue Mountains were invincible, forever high and lovely, forever ahead, dreamlike and unattainable. They would always be there.

Now, Chris stood looking into the distance with absorbed eyes. "Let's us go over to the Blue Mountains, Eva," she whispered. "I ain't a-scared, if you ain't."

Eva wasn't a-scared either; so the two of them strolled hand in hand across the road, out of sight of Jansie, and into the low woods of scrub oaks.

The mysterious cowpath that twisted between the mesquites and scrub live oaks was already alive with the minutiae of the springtime. The baby grass peeped tentatively out of the anxious arms of earth. Even the cautious mesquites were beginning to trust the relaxing coaxing of the warm March wind with a misty film of faintest green. Now and then, Chris came across an ambitious daisy, pushing ahead of his fellows, and puffing with little-girl seriousness, she would stoop and pick it. A limp bouquet gathered size in her clutching fingers.

The Blue Mountains were no longer in sight, hidden behind the enclosing walls of woods, but Chris had already forgotten them.

A cottontail darted across the pathway ahead of her, and the little girl stood still in terror. "What was that?" she asked Eva.

"That was just a cotton-tail bunny rabbit," Eva assured her. "He won't hurt you at all, Chrissie."

Relieved, Chris went on, and presently, she found some tiny, red cactus berries sticking up ripely from their pin-cushion of a bed. She ate them, and felt at home again.

The path was cool to her feet, except in the sunny places. In one of the sunny spots, she sat down for a while, and she and Eva built a little outlined house with the smooth prairie pebbles.

"There now, Eva," Chris told her playmate, "there's the kitchen and the bedroom and the smithy and — and— all."

Eva nodded and looked interested, then pointed an invisible hand at the outline. "And a stove for Jansie to cook on," she suggested.

Chris sat back, and smiled at this wonderful suggestion. "Oh my," she said respectfully, "you think of nice things, Eva!" She put a flat piece of mesquite bean in a corner of the pebble kitchen. "There's the stove, right there."

Eva smiled mysteriously, and threw back her golden curls. "Come on," she said. "Let's us go walking some more. I'm tired of this old playhouse, anyway."

Chris stood up and scratched herself where the grass had tickled. She kicked at the pebbles. "Me too," she agreed with Eva. "Let's us go on."

Living hand in invisible hand, the two of them went on down the path.

Suddenly, the springtime became a scent, an essence. Amazed, Chris stopped short in the pathway, sniffing the air. "What's that?" she asked Eva, but forgetting to listen for Eva's answer, she rendered her friend completely dumb.

Slowly, drawn by a scent, her bare feet moved. It wasn't flowers. She looked at the limply patient daisies in her fist with contemptuous eyes. They couldn't smell that way! It wasn't the trees. The new leaves never gave off that loveliness. It was getting closer and sweeter. Then a quick breeze blew

the wonderful smell away. Chris stood still in dismay. But the breeze blew by, and the scent came back.

There it was again, still closer. Then, as the pathway poured itself into a sunny, round glade, Chris knew that she had found it. It was a tree, a tree with no leaves, but with that heady intoxication falling about her from small, white clustered petals.

Drunk with springtime, Chris set Eva down under a tree and forgot her. "I'm gonna play," she told Eva as she consigned her to the role of audience. I'm gonna play like I'm a picture girl."

She paused to think. Her clothes weren't right. The picture of the beautiful lady in Annie's book didn't look like the grimy fadedness of her calico dress. That lady didn't have much of anything on.

Absorbed, Chris studied for a moment, then squirming to reach behind, she unbuttoned the dress and let it slide to the ground. Her dingy bleached flour-sacking drawers and pantywaist caught the sunlight. Panting at her own temerity, she folded the dress and laid it with the daisies beside Eva.

Then, remembering the cottontail, she tried a few running steps. That was fun, and she felt light and free in her panties. With a little twirl, she remembered the picture in Annie's book, and knew the feel of pink silk and spangles. Her dark brown hair blew lightly, as she spun across the sunny glade.

With one long breath, she drew in the springtime, the showering sweetness of the wild plum over her head, the Blue Mountains waiting in the distance, the running cottontail rabbit, even the disappointing daisies. She was a part of them all — and they of her. Her round babyish arms waved in delight, and she flew about in the sunshine.

Hidden by the dried heights of the winter grass, Willie lay outside the glade, watching the childish activity. His shotgun lay beside him, forgotten. The rabbits he came to find could go on their way, unmolested, for Willie was absorbed as he had never been absorbed in all his eighteen years.

Silently, he had lain watching as Chris had taken off her dress and had laid it on the ground. Guiltily, he had watched,

waiting for whatever was to be next. Now, his eyes followed her antics, even as they had followed the animals in the scrub of the prairie. He lay very still, absorbed and silent.

Slowly, but with the inexorableness of nature, the will of the big body pressed itself against the dimmed mind.

"It's just Chrissie a-playing," he whispered to himself in unwilling argument. "She's just a-playing."

But the game went on, and faster and faster flew the tiny figure in the panties and waist.

Willie stirred uneasily and licked his lips.

Exhausted at last, Chris dropped to the ground and lay, panting joyously. That was fun! She liked this game. She really did. Remembering Eva, she looked over to the tree. "Don't you wish you could do that, Eva?" she bragged in a whisper. "I can do it good!"

Back in the bushes, Willie rose uneasily to his hands and knees. With eyes fixed, trance-like, upon the glade, he moved slowly forward.

Chrissie lay still, unconscious of any presence, save that of the invisible Eva.

There was a step behind Willie, and a hand jerked at the big shoulder. "I'd like to know what you think you're doing, Willie!" Jansie's whisper was like a knife, cutting through his dazed dream. Willie ducked, and the big body let go. He was the stupid child again. "I wasn't going to do nothing," he whined as the brown fingers dug into his shoulder. "I was just watching Chrissie." He snickered suddenly and added, "She's in her drawers."

The brown hand drew back, and leaning forward, Jansie struck the surprised boy a stinging blow across the face. "I'll learn you to sneak around watching her!" she snapped. "You get home, you hear me?"

Willie turned away, sniffing a little in baffled outrage, but Jansie was not finished with him.

"You, Willie!" she stopped him with a tone as grim as the temper of a moment before had been hot, "Listen to me, Willie."

"Huh?" Willie stopped and eyed his sister, his glance anxious.

Jansie stood as tall as she could to look up into the stupid face above her. "You ever let me catch you sneaking around watching Chrissie again," she hissed, "and I'll kill you, Willie!"

Completely cowed, Willie picked up his gun and shambled off through the trees.

Jansie shuffled on into the glade. "Chrissie!" she called sharply.

Chris took one look at Jansie's face and made for the dress under the tree.

"What've you been doing and why have you got your dress off?" Jansie asked sternly.

Chris struggled hastily into the dress, fumbling for the buttons. "I was just playing," she answered, and her eyes would not come up. "I wasn't hurting nothing."

Jansie stood looking down at the downturned face. "Look at me!" she commanded.

Slowly, the hazel-green eyes came up, and Jansie studied them, her heart troubled within her. "Oh, Lord," she whispered worriedly. "What'll I do about her? I want her to be a good girl, not—" and she stopped, unable to mention any other possibility even to the Lord.

"Chrissie," she said slowly, and her words were groping for guidance. "I come way out here in these woods, hunting you, and when I do find you, what're you doing?"

Chris' eyes did not flicker, and Jansie answered herself. "I find you prancing around in your drawers! Ain't you ashamed?"

She paused again, but still the green eyes would not yield. The moment drew out, and Jansie waited for her answer. It came.

She sighed and shuffled over to the wild plum tree, her long fingers reaching for a small, tough branch.

She turned, the switch in her hand, her face sick. "Come here, Chrissie," she commanded softly.

Reluctantly, Chris eased across the glade.

Jansie took one small arm in a hand, and with the other hand, she switched the tender brown of the little legs. Chris danced and shrieked with mingled pain and rage. Red welts appeared on the soft skin. Jansie's face was white.

"There, now," she threw away the switch and turned away. "That'll teach you to go sneaking around talking to yourself, and stripping off to romp in the woods!"

She looked back at the forlorn little figure snubbing under the plum tree. "Wipe your nose," she commanded, but her voice was gentle, "and come on home."

Chris wiped her nose, and considered. Then, keeping one eye on Jansie's back, she ran to the tree and gathered up the daisies. "Come on, you Eva," she said crossly. "You come on home, you bad girl!"

Unperturbed, Eva came, following Chris as meekly as Chris was following Jansie.

Then, remembering, Chris turned back to her disgraced friend. "And wipe your nose, Eva!" she commanded sternly.



5

SHE's gotta go to school, Mamma." Jansie's thin face was stubborn with will. "She's gotta learn something!"

Annie swayed gently back and forth in the rocking chair that Mrs. Witherspoon had given Jansie for some laundry work, and patted Chris' back with a soothing motion. "Does Chrissie want to go to school?" she asked tenderly. "Maybe she don't want to go, Jansie."

They were sitting in the open doorway of the smithy, and outside, the long blue twilight of Indian summer lay warm upon the prairie. Jansie sat on a box at Annie's feet, while Chris lay contentedly in the fat woman's lap, her seven-year-old body relaxed and secure.

At Annie's question, Chris sat up, and, rubbing her arms with her hands in a curiously grown-up gesture, looked thoughtful. "Oh, I dunno," she said slowly, but the words were for Annie. Her hazel-green eyes gleamed eagerly across at Jansie. "I guess so," she added, and swung her feet to the floor. She was losing her chubby baby look in the lengthening of girlhood.

Annie sighed in vague resignation, "Then I reckon we'll have to let you go, Chrissie," she agreed indulgently. "But she'll have to have things, Jansie," she told the crippled girl out of some dim memory of her own scant schooling, "Books and pencils — and things like that."

"I know," Jansie's face was serious, "I'll get her a writing tablet, and Joe has a piece of pencil. I talked to the teacher yesterday, and she said if we'd let Chrissie start to school, she'd see that she got some books."

Annie smiled and stroked the dark brown head before her. "I'll hate to see the little thing a-going so far all by herself," she fretted softly. "It's a mile to the schoolhouse, even if she cuts across Miller's pasture instead of staying straight on the road."

"She's got to go!" Jansie looked out across the distances before them and her black eyes were still with purpose. "She's got a right to schooling." Behind them the clang of R. P.'s hammer was loud in the still air, and before them, far away, the Blue Mountains lay rich with the shadows of evening. Then Jansie added, quietly as if in answer to some inner voice of her own, "How can we expect her to be a good girl if she don't know nothing?"

Chris started the long walk to school the next morning with mixed emotions. It was thrilling to be going to school, and she wanted to learn to read. She especially wanted to read the books in Annie's room. The pictures between their worn covers were so interesting that the reading must be wonderful. But deep inside her, Chris was dreading the boys and girls at school. She didn't know what they thought nor what sort of things they did, and she was afraid of them. She looked down at the soiled front of her apron and wondered vaguely if she looked all right. Somehow, she didn't feel that she was proper for school.

The big bell in the turret of the four-room school building was ringing, as Chris stepped onto the beaten hardness of the school yard. She hesitated. A wild impulse to run, to

flee back to the familiar world of home, came over her. She stopped, poised for flight like some frightened wild thing.

The teacher, who was standing in the doorway waiting for the marching line to get in, looked toward the little figure on the edge of the school ground, and Chris grew rigid with panic. Feeling fixed by the glance and unable to run now, she swallowed at the lump in her throat and braced herself for whatever was coming.

Miss Emily Morgan liked children. She was that rare genius, a born teacher. Not even the evidence in her mirror of the relentless passage of the years could dim her joy in her calling. She was teaching her life away. So what! She was too busy to worry about being an old maid.

She came down from the steps toward the trembling little girl in the dirty dress, smiling reassuringly. "Hello," her voice was matter-of-fact. "You're the little Sanders girl, aren't you? Your sister talked to me about your coming to school."

Chris nodded dumbly up at the tall woman in the sweeping skirt, trying to twist her grubby hands behind her. "Yes'm," she managed, her eyes almost fixed with the effort. "I — I wanta start to school!"

Miss Emily held out a welcoming hand. "Come in then, dear." Her eyes smiled down. "What's your name, honey?"

"Christmas Rose Sanders," Chris muttered in a husky voice.

Miss Emily's lips twitched, but there was no hint of a smile in her voice as she asked, "And what do they call you at home? Rose?"

Chris shook her head. "No'm, Chris."

"I see." Miss Emily nodded gravely. "Then we'll call you Chris, too."

The worst thing about school, Chris decided when she could think again, was the kids. Miss Emily had put her in a seat all by herself, though most of the seats in the room were double, and Chris was thankful for that. But there were still children all around her. Chris sat with her eyes fixed firmly upon her own grubby, tightly folded, but still trembling hands on the desk before her. She didn't dare

look up. She might see a flash of that something that she had learned to watch for in the faces of the people who dropped nickels in Jansie's cup, when Paw took them all to Fort Worth.

And recess was awful too. The well-dressed little girls just stood quietly about her and stared. To Chris, their faded, but starched gingham dresses were the height of elegance. And they all had ruffled sunbonnets!

The day ended at last. Chris stumbled home, too battered by emotion to be proud of the almost-new books that Miss Emily had given her, and too numb to wonder how Miss Emily happened to have them to give.

Jansie was watching for her from the smithy doorway. She eyed Chris and grunted a question, "How was it?"

"I ain't going back no more." Chris sat down on the steps to the lean-to, and propped her head on a thin, childish hand. "I ain't going no more, Jansie."

"What was wrong?" Jansie's voice was husky with concern. "Did somebody pick on you?"

Chris shook her head. "No, the teacher would've whipped them if they had, I think, but — they looked!"

"Who gave you them books?" Jansie jerked a head at the little pile at Chris's side.

"The teacher." Chris was too weary to care.

Jansie sat, communing with some inward concern for a long moment. "What was wrong with you, honey?" she asked quietly.

Chris put her head down on an arm and began to cry, jerkily. "Everything! They was all clean, and they smelled good, and they — they had sunbonnets!"

"Oh." Jansie's thoughts turned in again with a somber burning. "I'll get some hot water on, right away," she said quietly, "and bring in the wash tub. Then, while the water's heating, I'll — I'll see —"

Chris flung up her head in a wild gesture. "You mean I gotta go back, Jansie? I can't! I can't!" she wailed.

Jansie struggled to her feet. "Listen to me, Chrissie," she said gently, but there was an immovable purpose behind her

words, "you've got to go to school. You've got to learn! Do you want to — to — live like this all your life?" And she flung out a hand in a gesture so conclusive and so convincing that Chris, not understanding, yet was silenced.

When Chris had been established by the kitchen fire to rest and await the heating of the water in the wash boiler, Jansie shoved the rusty tin tub into a corner, ready for use, and went out to the smithy. R. P. was languidly stirring the forge fire preparatory to heating a horseshoe.

"Paw," Jansie paused by the anvil, and stood waiting for R. P.'s attention, "Paw!"

"Huh?" R. P. turned the shoe in the blaze.

"I want you to put a bridle on Daisy for me," Jansie told him. "I've got something I want to do."

"Where you going this late, Jansie?" R. P. demanded curiously, but he laid down his tongs. "It'll be dark before long."

And it was long after dark before Jansie came home.

The ride to the Smallings' was slow, for Daisy was not young, and the lane was dusty and uneven. But Jansie sat swaying on the old blanket that served as a saddle and her face was turned straight ahead with the progress of her thoughts.

Mrs. Smalling received her with courtesy and then with increasing interest as Jansie talked. "— so you see," concluded the hunchbacked girl at the end of a recital of Chris' problems, "I've got to get her some things, some decent dresses and a bonnet, Miz' Smalling!" and for a moment, her voice shook. "She's got to go to school!" she paused, got herself firmly in hand, and went on, "So if your little girls have any little dresses that they've outgrown, maybe Chris could wear them. That is, if — if you could see your way clear to giving them." And the dark eyes could not meet Mrs. Smalling's for a long moment.

Mrs. Smalling sat silent and thoughtful. She was a kind woman, and she had heard of Jansie's care of the abandoned child, and even of the conversion scene in the brush arbor. "I — I'm sure that I do have some clothes, Jansie," she said

gently, "including a sunbonnet. Can you manage about — about keeping the little girl — clean?"

Jansie nodded grimly. "Yes'm, I'll see to it that she goes to school clean." She glanced down at her own grimed knuckles and shamefacedly tucked them under the folds of her dress. "I'll see to it," she repeated.

So it was well past dark when Jansie got home. She laid the bundle which she had brought back with her near the anvil in the smithy, and went up the steps into the kitchen.

R. P. was sitting by the stove, his hands coaxing mournful chords from his guitar, while Annie sat beside him, singing in a plaintive, cracked alto. The boys were stretched, half asleep, on the floor near the warmth.

Chris was watching the tiny bubbles on the water in the wash boiler, and her hazel eyes were apprehensive.

Jansie rolled up her sleeves, and pulled the tin washtub from the corner, while Chris looked more and more alarmed. "I don't wanta be washed, Jansie," she assured the hunch-backed girl. "I just don't wanta go to school, anyway!"

The music died to a wailing finale and there was silence in the lean-to, as R. P. and the boys eyed the proceedings with uneasy faces.

Jansie glanced at the males and jerked her head toward the shop in a significant gesture.

Willie sat up and looked at his sister with horror. "You going to wash her all over, Jansie?" he asked.

Jansie grunted a grim acknowledgment.

Even Annie looked distressed. "She might take cold, Jansie," she protested, "and take a lung fever."

Chrissie began to sniffle at this awful prospect, "I might take cold," she reminded Jansie.

Jansie made no answer, but went on alternating hot and cold water into the tub from the wash boiler and the water bucket.

Presently, she knelt and tested the water with her hand. "There now," she told Chris, "you get in there and Jansie'll help you get clean."

R. P. and the boys shuffled out in funereal procession.

As one preparing for execution, Chris unbuttoned her dress, slipped out of her panties and waist and stepped into the tub, only to jerk out again with a howl. "It's too hot!" she shrieked.

Jansie struggled patiently to her feet and went for more cold water. At last, the temperature of the water in the tub was bearable, and Chris, with an air of deepest martyrdom, submitted to being scrubbed with homemade lye soap.

And in time and with considerable difficulty, the job was done, even to the half moons of encrusted dirt at the back of Chris' heels, and the dark semi-circles where her thumbs joined her hands. There was a heavy rim of scum around the inner edge of the tub, made up of a combination of dirt, lye soap and hard well water.

When the little girl was out of the tub and standing, shivering woefully, before the fire, Jansie picked up the soiled clothes and using them for a towel, rubbed the thin little body until it glowed. "There, now," she panted, "You get on a clean dress and get into bed."

"What clean dress?" demanded Chris, staring at the soggy calico that she'd worn to school. "You've wiped me on my dress."

For answer, Jansie shuffled out to bring in the bundle from the smithy. "I've got you some things here," she announced in a matter-of-fact tone that could not hide the delight behind the words. "Some nice things."

Chris looked on in amazed happiness as the wonders of the bundle appeared. There were worn but starchy panties and waists, three sets of them. "Mrs. Smalling said so you could have enough to change twice a week," Jansie explained with the air of one born to such luxury. There were four slightly faded dresses, well-ironed and crackling with starch, and still smelling faintly of moth balls from Mrs. Smalling's systematic housekeeping. There was a high-necked nightgown, thrillingly ruffled and only a little too short, a well-washed cotton sweater, and almost perfectly good shoes, that Jansie laid aside for cold weather.

But the crowning glory of the event was the triumphantly ruffled cotton sunbonnet Jansie brought forth!

Chris squealed with joy, forgetting even the discomfort of her itching clean skin. "I do wanta go to school, now," she confided to Jansie. "I just bet I like it tomorrow!"

But even with the clothes, there was such a vast body of frightening knowledge to be acquired. For instance, there was the matter of the lunch pails. Almost all the children brought lunches to school, and the standard pail was a small syrup bucket with a pressed-in top. Whether it was a matter of convenient size in the pail itself, or the picture of a beaming, be-bonneted schoolgirl on the label, perhaps no one knew. It was just the proper thing to bring your lunch in a Sally Ann syrup bucket.

Being new, and not knowing the custom, Chris brought hers in the first empty pail that happened to be handy, which was a gallon-sized lard pail. It was several days before she became aware that her pail was too big, and when the knowledge came, it came the hard way.

It happened at recess during her second week of school. Chris was just beginning to relax into the comfortable anonymity of the schoolroom by that time, and to realize with relief that the Smalling girls, out of the dignity of a slightly higher grade, were not going to tell about the outgrown clothes. After all, Mrs. Smalling was a woman who ruled her household with firmness.

So, at this particular recess time, Chris was beginning to let slacken the tight reins of wary watchfulness that had been her attitude for the first few days of school.

The pupils of the first grade were marching out for the fifteen-minute freedom. Chris, being among the taller ones, due to the fact that she should have started to school almost a year earlier, was among the last to come out. As she stood in the schoolroom, waiting for the line to go past the cloakroom, she watched Eileen Parker and Isadora Smith giggling near the front of the line. Chris watched them with fascinated eyes, for, as the daughters of the town banker and its most prosperous merchant, they were out of another world. Eileen's

smooth yellow curls and Isadora's dainty clothes were marvels to behold, and Chris watched them with a kind of detached delight in their perfection. And then, as the line inched forward, she became aware that the cause of their amusement was the pile of lunchpails in a corner near the wraps.

Edging closer, Chris peered to see the thing which such wondrous beings found amusing. If they thought it was funny, it must be hilarious, indeed!

All unconscious of an audience and giggling happily, Eileen nudged her friend, and pointed a small but effective finger at the pails. "See, Isadora, that biggest pail!" Chris looked at the stack and realized with a sickish horror that hers was the biggest pail! "See," the wicked little voice went on, "It looks just exactly like the bucket that the tamale man carries!"

And as Chris stepped back, crushed, the two went off into another outburst of giggles.

It wasn't any satisfaction to Chris that justice descended upon the gigglers with a swift and awful certainty. It didn't help a bit to have Miss Emily make Eileen and Isadora stay in at recess. Miss Emily was just punishing them for giggling, a general offense.

Chris knew, now, that her lunch pail was too large.

So she learned.

Then there was the time of the big spring blizzard when Chris was in the fourth grade.

Snow was beginning to spit from a darkening sky when she awoke that morning. Hunching her shoulders under the quilts, she lay and listened to the wind, depression deepening within her. It was bad enough to be out of paper again, without having a norther blow up before she could start to school!

She lay still, too woe-begone to get up, considering ways and means of obtaining another writing tablet. Jansie had been sick off and on all through February and early March, and hadn't even been able to do the Smiths' washing. Chris knew that an extra nickel for paper was simply out of the question, and she hadn't mentioned her need to the hunch-

backed girl. After all, Jansie had given her a good thick tablet for Christmas, and it had seemed wonderfully sufficient at the time, but it was all gone now. Chris lay and wished fervently that she hadn't made all those extra sheets of work in writing practice, grades or no grades.

By the time she was ready for school, the norther was in full blast. Chris opened the door and stood shivering, dreading to face the force of the wind.

"I guess maybe I'd better stay home today, Jansie," she suggested in the plaintive tone that she had picked up from Annie to use on occasions of entreaty. "It's getting awful cold."

A fit of coughing shook Jansie's thin shoulders, but her tone, when she spoke, was brisk. "No, you go on to school, Chrissie, and learn your lessons."

"But Jansie," Annie added sleepily from the warmest corner behind the stove, "it wouldn't hurt her none to miss a day now and then —"

"Yes," Jansie's dark eyes were deep with determination, "it would hurt for her to miss. She might get a habit of missing, and then how'd she learn?" She gave the little girl a not-ungentle push from the rear. "You get along with you, Chrissie, and if you'll walk fast, you won't be too cold."

Then, as Chris turned reluctantly toward the door, she added, "Wait a minute, Chrissie, and I'll get you your geography book."

She shuffled to her own cot, and reaching under the quilts, drew out the wide, yellow-backed book.

Chris took it, her eyes bright with interest. "How'd you like that part about the north pole that I told you to read, Jansie?" she demanded. "Wasn't it good? And about the northern lights?"

Jansie nodded, but her dark eyes refused to meet the hazel-green ones turned to her. "Yes, it sure was," she agreed vaguely, then added, "I liked the pictures — too."

R. P., who had come in from the smithy just in time to hear Chris' questions, snorted disbelievingly. "What're they teaching them kids up there, anyway?" he demanded of no-

body in particular, and going over to the stove, he sat down in a cane-bottomed chair and propped his feet against the oven door. "A lot of plain foolishness!"

Jansie and Chris paid no attention to him. "Jansie," Chris went on, and her eyes were happy, "How'd you like me to bring you a lot of books home to read? They're awful interesting!"

But Jansie's dark eyes seemed to brood upon some troubled inner knowledge. "No, I reckon not, Chrissie," she said gently. "I — I reckon I won't be having time to—to-read." She glanced quickly toward the stove, but R. P. and Annie were paying no attention, being wrapped in the sleepy contentment of being warm. "Maybe sometimes you can — read to me," she added, and as she saw realization dawning in the childish face before her, she added with a quick pride, "It'll show me how good you can do it!"

And Chris turned away toward the door.

It was cold! Chris looked out through the open doors of the smithy, and shivered, then half turned back. If she told Jansie she was out of paper, Jansie'd let her stay home. Then, she paused at the foot of the steps to the lean-to, her face troubled. If she told Jansie she was out of paper, Jansie'd go and try to do the Smiths' washing again this week, to get the money, and Jansie had been sick.

Chris drew her coat about her, pulled her cap well down over her ears, and, picking up her books, went out into the storm.

High overhead the wind whined and moaned like some live thing in pain. Somehow, the thought of the storm and her own problem seemed to blend in Chris' mind. She bent her small body to the wind in a grim determination.

The scrub-oaks along the road shrilled and vibrated with the gale, while the blowing snow seemed to parallel the earth, in spite of deepening drifts. Soon Chris was shivering uncontrollably, and she pulled her worn coat about her with jerking, numbed fingers.

Slitting her eyes against the beating of the sharp flakes, she trudged along the ruts, her shoes caked with frozen mush.

She watched the road and was scarcely aware that a different world was shaping itself about her — that outlines of familiar landmarks were fast disappearing. The usual wide distances of sky and prairie were closing into a world of biting, whirling, wind-driven cold. She turned to look back, wistfully, along the homeward way, and she was grateful for the moment's respite from the fight with the wind. But if she went back, she'd have to tell Jansie about the tablet. So, bracing herself, she faced the wind again.

Eyes half closed, she struggled on for long moments. Presently, there were trees on both sides of her, and she stopped in surprise, for the small scrub-oaks went along only one side of the road to school! Suddenly terrified, she began to run, her breath jerking. The dragging folds of the snow pulled at her feet. The cruel fingers of the wind snatched at her cap. The trees about her grew thicker, and to her child's eyes, they were a shrouded forest, their white-burdened branches as unfamiliar as the strange white reaches of the prairie. Nowhere, in all this muffled world of white, was there a known spot.

She was feeling her way from tree to tree, now, peering through the encircling gauze that swirled about her. She paused and listened, but only the lonely whistle of the wind came to her ears.

And she was less cold, and her interest in the surrounding world was waning.

Strange figures trailing white garments seemed to dance in the storm, and long, whistling, minor-keyed songs were in the wind. Somewhere through the scrub a fire gleamed fitfully. Chris struggled toward it, but her efforts were indifferent. It just didn't seem important to get there. It was hard walking. She was tired.

And near her, just in front, almost near enough to touch, she saw Eval! Eva stood, smiling faintly, her golden curls smooth and summerlike in spite of the falling snow.

"Hello, Eval!" Chris was not sure whether she had spoken the words or had only thought them, but she was pleased to see her friend. "Where did you come from?"

But the fire, a very small one, was nearer now, and Chris could see dark figures moving stealthily about it. And there were larger forms that might be horses. Chris wondered dazedly what could be bringing men and horses out on a day like this.

She looked back at Eva, but her friend was gone. Deeply disappointed, Chris decided to sit down and rest for a while.

She was a little sleepy, but not at all cold, now.

She sank to a soft spot in the snow beneath a scrub-oak, and carefully laying her schoolbooks on the ground, laid her head upon them.

But the books wouldn't be still. Frowning crossly, Chris shifted herself to a more comfortable position, and tried to go back to sleep, but the jiggling went on. Painfully, she opened her eyes, and found Joe's freckled face bending above her.

Slowly, Chris became aware that the jiggling motion was a horse, and that she was riding, held closely in Joe's arms. She was wrapped in his big coat.

Warmed and unquestioning, Chris smiled up at him. "Hello, Joe," she said softly. "I thought I was on my way to school."

Joe made no answer, but looked down into her face with a worried intensity.

Suddenly, Chris discovered that her hands were hurting terribly, and she began to cry.

Joe shook his head at her. "Don't cry, honey," he said in a gentle tone. "Joe's got you, and we're almost home now."

"But my hands hurt!" Chris wailed.

Joe held her close. "We'll have a look at the little hands when we get home," he told her. "Right now you just lay here against Joe."

And presently, when the pain had eased a bit, Chris asked, "Were you by the fire, Joe? I saw the fire, but it was too much trouble to walk so far."

Joe's eyes were inscrutable under the whitened visor of his cap. "Was it now, honey?"

Chris was confused. "Why did you have a fire today, Joe?" she asked. "Why didn't you just come on home?"

"Say, Chrissie," Joe seemed not to have heard her question, "what were you doing away out here in the woods, anyway?"

Chris squirmed a little, for her hands were beginning to hurt again. "I didn't want to go to school today, but Jansie made me. She'd have let me stay home if I'd told her I was out of paper, but I didn't want to tell her."

Joe's light-blue eyes grew deeper with tenderness. "That's too bad," he agreed seriously. "Why didn't you want to tell Jansie? Would she scold you?"

"Oh no." Chris shook her head within the confining folds of the coat. "But she'd worry. And besides, she don't have any money and she isn't able to work, yet. She's been sick, you know, Joe."

"I see." Joe's voice was gravely quiet, and he looked away from Chris with still eyes. "Is paper *that* important, Chris?"

"Oh yes." breathed Chris. "You have to have paper in school, Joe!"

"Do you have all the other things you need for school?" Joe asked.

Chris hesitated. "Well, no, not always," she admitted. "But I make the best grades in the room, anyway!" she told him with pride in her voice.

"That's fine," Joe agreed absently. "But why go to school, anymore, anyway? I never went to school very regular, and I get along. Haven't you learned enough?"

"I *have* to go to school, Joe!" Chris' voice was surprised. "Jansie says I do. And besides," she admitted honestly. "I like it."

Joe laughed. "Well, for them that wants to go, I reckon it's all right! And —" his freckled face grew grim, "there's ways to get the things you need, Chris."

"You mean a new tablet? Oh, good!" Chris squirmed happily. "I'll tell Jansie."

"No," Joe's voice was firm, "we won't tell Jansie. It — it might worry her."

Although Chris was disappointed, she felt too comfortable to argue.

Jansie was standing in the open doorway of the smithy as they came up, and her dark face was indifferent to the snatching wind that jerked at her skirt. At the sight of them, she shuffled out into the storm to meet them.

"Joel!" she said in fervent relief. "I was getting awfully worried about sending her out in this!"

Joe eased the little girl down into her reaching arms, and climbed stiffly down himself. "What I can't figure is why you sent her out in it, Jansie," he told her mercilessly. "I found her nearly gone out there under a scrub-oak! She was nearly froze to death!"

He took the bundled child into his wet shirt-sleeved arms and carried her through the smithy and up the lean-to steps, followed by a frightened Jansie.

"I shouldn't a-sent her out!" she choked and stumbled on the steps. "I didn't know the storm was so bad!"

R. P. and Annie were sitting by the cookstove, with Willie hunched sleepily in a corner. At Joe's entrance, they looked up in surprise, and R. P. stood up with more than his wonted haste. "What's the matter, Joe?" he demanded loudly. "Is our Chrissie hurt?"

Joe shook his head. "No, but she's nearly froze to death," he said grimly, "thanks to Jansie!" And striding across the room, he laid Chris in Annie's ample lap, then turned to Willie. "Go out and get some snow, Willie. Her hands is frostbit."

He leaned over Annie, and pushing aside her fumbling hands, unwound Chris from his ragged sheepskin coat.

Jansie reached a hand to touch Joe's sodden shirt-sleeve. "You're soaked, Joe," she told him humbly. "You wrapped her in your coat."

Joe shrugged and glanced over his shoulder at R. P. "Sheb Jackson's horse is outside, Paw. I wish you'd bring him in to the smithy, out of the storm."

R. P. grunted and went out willingly enough.

"What're you doing riding Sheb Jackson's horse, Joe?" Jansie's dark eyes were troubled. "Sheb's no good, and you know it."

"Now, Jansiel" Annie's voice was gently reproving, "He's just a boy, I guess. You'd better let Joey alone about his friends."

Joe's face was sullen. "I had to get Chrissie home some way, didn't I?" he demanded. "And besides, Jansie, you keep your hands off my business. See?"

Jansie turned back to Chris. "Just the same, Joe," she said quietly. "The Jackson's are a bad lot, and they'll get you into trouble."

"Now, Jansie—" Annie quavered indulgently.

But Joe ignored his mother and glared at his half sister. "I reckon you'd rather let Chrissie nearly freeze to death going to school because she's scared to tell you that she don't have enough paper!" he said bitterly, then went on as if in answer to an unspoken argument. "I'll tell you this, Jansie. I'm plenty sick of never having a dime to my name. I'm sick of standing around town and watching other fellows have money to spend on what they want—"

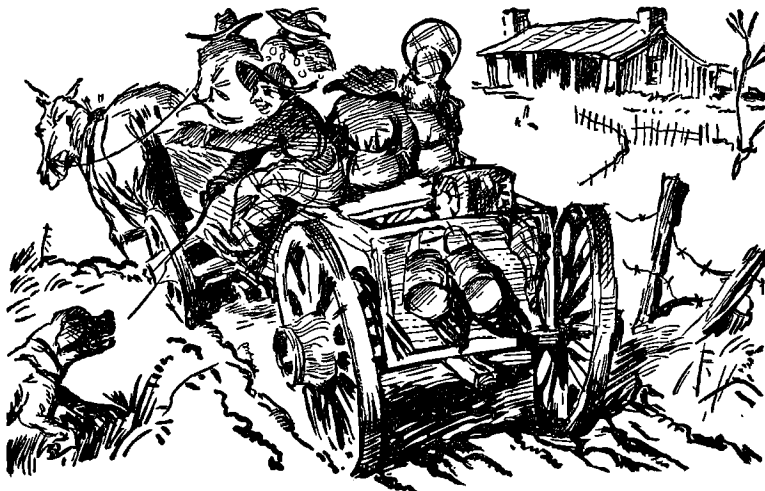
But Jansie was not listening. She was looking down at Chris with stricken eyes. "Do you need paper, Chris?" she asked.

"Not much," Chris said stoutly. "Don't worry about it, Jansie. I'll get along." Then turning to Joe, she looked reproachful. "You shouldn't have thrown that up to Jansie, Joe."

Joe made no answer, but looked past her with sullen eyes.

"I'm glad I did see your fire, though," Chris said placatingly.

But Joe's light eyes were opaque as they looked past her. "What fire?" he asked in a blank, dead voice. "I don't know what you're talking about." And only the dancing light from the stove grill was reflected in his shallow blue eyes.



6

IT seemed that spring would never come that year. When the last lingering ribbon of snow had vanished from the sheltering scrub, the cold-locked earth still lay stubborn beneath the hand of the coaxing sun. Nights flicked the world with frost-tipped fingers, and the foolish fruits blossomed under the deceptive warmth, only to be nipped back with a ruthless certainty. It was a hard spring.

In the smithy and lean-to, times were as hard as the weather. Jansie developed a spring cough that held on, in spite of Annie's dosing with turpentine and sugar. Chris struggled back and forth to school through the grim days. The salt pork and beans were running low in the lean-to kitchen, and Chris dreamed of greens with the persistence of a winter-starved rabbit.

But at long last spring did come in. After the final thrust of the Easter spell, winter retreated for good. And when spring did come, it came with a rush. Almost overnight, the scrub on the prairie became a gauze of living green, and the gaunt cattle wandered over it in an ecstasy of dazed nibbling.

Chris watched the lilac by the well burst into a glory of perfumed spears, and her heart blossomed in answer to the loveliness. The sap was rising, rushing up in everything, reaching for the life-giving forces of the sky. It was spring!

Even R. P. felt the stirring of the season through his chronically weary bones. It was on a sun-washed Saturday morning that he made his first expression of the seasonal stirrings to Annie. He came carrying his guitar, to sit beside the fat woman on the kitchen steps, where she sat warming herself. R. P. had the air of a man who had charted a decisive course of action, and now and then, as he spoke to his wife, his absent fingers coaxed a whining chord from the well-used instrument in his lap.

"Wife," he pushed back his hat and scratched at the straggling mop beneath, "Wife, I think it's about time for a little trip, soon's we can get away." The guitar gave out with a mournful whine, and its owner resolutely avoided any mention of the spring plowing.

Annie bridled happily. "Oh, I'd like to take a trip, Mr. Sanders," she assured him happily, "and your geetar sounds mighty good again. It'll be nice to camp out as we go."

R. P. nodded benignly. "It will that," he agreed. "And the weather's purty now. We'll enjoy the trip. I think old Daisy can pull the wagon if we take it slow, and we can take along the camping things."

Annie smoothed the soiled apron over her lap and beamed, already tasting in prospect the feel of a journey. "We've not been to Cowtown for several years," she reminded R. P., "and I think the change will do us good."

Willie, shuffling around the corner of the smithy and pausing at the sight of them, caught sight of the guitar in R. P.'s lap. His round face bloomed with delight. "Are we going somewheres, Paw?" he demanded. "You're getting ready to go someplace, ain't you?"

R. P. smiled benevolently. "Maybe we will be going some place, Willie," he told the boy. "Maybe me and your mamma are fixing to take you children on a little trip, mighty soon."

Delighted as only a child-mind can be, big Willie shuffled his grown-up body around in a happy prance. "When we going, Paw? When we going, huh?" he burred happily. Then, at some inner thought, his face lighted with gleeful malice. "Joey won't get to go! Old Joey won't get to go! He ain't at home!"

"Now, Willie, don't you be ugly," Annie admonished absently. "We ain't glad Joe's going to miss this trip. Just because he's not here right now, he won't get to go, but—" she sighed in forced concern, "we'll miss having him."

But Willie was not going to be inveigled into a hypocritical pose of affection. "I'm glad," he told Annie solemnly. "I'm glad he won't get to go. Old Joey won't let Willie have any fun."

At this moment, Jansie came to the kitchen door and looked out. "What's all the excitement about?" she asked.

R. P. stiffened a little. "Me and Mamma are planning a little trip," he said, not meeting Jansie's eyes, "down toward Cowntown."

Jansie's face turned sick. "I thought maybe we'd made the last of those trips," she said hopelessly.

R. P.'s mouth went stubborn. "Now you listen to me, Jansie," he said in a sullen half-whine, "Don't you go getting no biggety ideas about being too good to help us out now and then. It don't hurt you a bit to do your part, and this has been a hard winter, a mighty hard winter!"

Jansie's dark eyes were goaded. "Why don't we stay at home then, where we belong, and do the spring plowing and get at the garden, instead of traipsing off to Fort Worth, and—and—whining around other people—"

But even as she lashed out at them, she looked at Annie's fat face and slack mouth, at R. P.'s sullen, weak little eyes, and knew that it was hopeless. She'd have to go.

"We're going on a trip, we're going on a trip!" chanted Willie, all unconscious of the conflict that was going on before him. "I'll go tell Chrissie."

Jansie turned away from the door, and her voice was slow and dull. "I'll tell her," she said wearily. "I'd rather tell her myself."

As she turned back into the kitchen, closing the door behind her, Chris looked up from the table, where she'd been bending over schoolwork. "Tell me what, Jansie?" she asked, her eyes still absent on the work before her. "What're they talking about out there?"

Jansie swiped at the kitchen table with a dishrag. "Paw is planning another trip to Fort Worth, Chrissie," she said quietly.

Chris frowned and marked her place in her book with a finger. "I don't want to go, Jansie." She watched Jansie's face. "I— I— don't like those trips."

Jansie went to the corner of the room and picked up the broom. "Nobody knows how *I* hate to go, Chrissie," she muttered, and tackled the floor with angry swipes. "But what can I do?" and her question was more to herself than it was to the child. "What can I do?"

"Jansie," Chris pushed back her smooth, dark curls and changed the subject, "Jansie, where is Joe?" She watched the crippled girl out of the corner of her eyes.

Jansie paused in her sweeping, and though her back was toward Chris, she did not turn around. "Why, I reckon he's got a job somewhere—", her voice was slow.

"What kind of a job?" Chris asked. "What kind of work can Joe do?"

Jansie went on sweeping without answering.

"What if he should come home while we're gone, and we wouldn't be here?" persisted Chris. "What if that should happen?"

Jansie's voice was very quiet. "Joe won't be home until June, Chris," she told the little girl. She opened the door and swept down the steps to the smithy.

"How do you know?" demanded Chris, as Jansie came back in.

"He told me," Jansie answered in a tone of finality, and going to the corner, she propped the broom upside down and started for the bedroom door.

But still Chris was not satisfied. "Jansie," her eyes were on her own hands and she did not look at Jansie, "if there was anything wrong about Joe," she paused, and then went on, "You know, like if — if he was in jail over in Hackberry County or something, I wouldn't let it make me hate Joe, would you?" Her head came up and the hazel-green eyes were too bright.

Jansie stood very still in the bedroom doorway, her back to the child. "What makes you think Joe's in jail?" she asked toward the bedroom wall. "Where'd you get that idea?"

Chris laughed, but there were tears behind the laughter. "I don't know," she answered off-handedly. "Maybe it was just — just something some of the kids said at school."

"And what did they say?" Jansie's voice was tired.

"Oh, Charley Highley got mad because I do read better than he does, and he said, well, he guessed old reading didn't make much difference anyway, if part of your family was in jail. He said his daddy said that Joe was in jail."

Jansie turned, and walking across the room, laid a tender hand on the little girl's shoulder. "Don't you pay no attention to that Charley Highley, honey," she said gently. "He don't know nothing! And besides," she hesitated, "even if Joe was in jail, that wouldn't be your fault. You just go right on beating Charley Highley ever' time you can!"

Chris sighed, studied Jansie for a long moment, then bent again to her lessons.

The weather was "sure fine" for a camping-out trip, as Annie remarked to R. P., when they were well started down the road toward Fort Worth. "You just couldn't have asked for a purtier day."

R. P. nodded benignly and shifted his guitar to a more comfortable position as it hung by its strap from his shoulder. "I thought it was jest about the right time," he said grandly.

Chris sat beside Jansie on a board set across the wagon behind R. P. and Annie, and watched the countryside unroll like a slow film beneath their creaking wheels. Old Daisy walked with a steady pace that befitted her years, and their progress was, accordingly, exceedingly leisurely.

Jansie, her face quiet beneath the overshadowing brim of her elderly best hat, sat silent. Her protests at taking Chris out of school for this trip had been overridden with immovable blandness. And here they were, all the Sanders, except Joe, feet propped on quilt rolls, a few clothes tied up in boxes under the seats, and listening to the familiar thump of the frying pan as it swung against the side of the wagon with the movement of their progress.

Willie sat on the back of the wagon, swinging his big feet off into space and shouting joyously at every house they passed.

"Hush up, you Willie!" Jansie snapped nervously when Willie had roared in delighted reply to the tenth successive dog. "You want the whole country to know we're a-going?"

R. P. held the reins loosely in one grimy hand while he turned in his seat to glare at the crippled girl. "You hush up, yourself, Jansie!" he ordered. "You stop that a-trying to ruin all our good times."

Jansie lapsed into a silence of resentful acceptance, and Chris looked at her sympathetically, then leaned over to whisper, "Don't you worry, Jansie." She patted the work-hardened hand in the faded calico lap. I'll study while I'm gone. I won't get behind the other kids at school."

Jansie smiled crookedly into the earnest hazel-green eyes. "That's all right, honey," she said softly. "You're mighty sweet." She shifted her lame back into a more comfortable position, and looked out across the newly turned fields that spread away from the road.

Up front, his ill-humor of a moment before already forgotten, R. P. was talking to Annie, planning their itinerary. "We'll camp at the Millses' pasture tonight," he was saying. "There's good water there and the Millses is always nice about us camping there."

Annie nodded, and the faded roses on her hat bobbed cheerfully. "And we'll be in Fort Worth day after tomorrow, or maybe the next day," she added, "we'll be in the city!"

R. P. chirped solemnly at old Daisy, and slapped the reins a good two feet above the old horse. "I ain't decided yet where we'll camp in the city," he said thoughtfully. "They do say it has growed some since the war has started."

Annie looked puzzled. "I can't see why Mister Wilson's war would make a town grow," she said plaintively. Then changing to a more familiar topic, she added, "I wish Joey was with us. I miss him and his tunes on his French harp." Her voice was placidly sorrowful.

R. P.'s face darkened righteously. "I always told Joe he was going to get into trouble running round with them Jacksons! I raised him right, and I got no patience with him."

"Well, now, Mister Sanders," Annie said mildly, "don't be too hard on the boy. Nearly all boys gets into a little trouble now and then. Joe is a good boy, a mighty good boy at heart." And on this comfortable note, they relapsed into an unworried, contented silence.

The road was deep with the beaten ruts of recent rains, and the wagon wheels pressed against the yielding texture of semi-hard mud. Old Daisy's footfalls were muffled as on dough. They passed through gates and by cattleguards that led into mile upon mile of rolling ranch land, and into lanes that took them between the sweet disturbance of freshly plowed fields. An occasional farmer waved a friendly hand as they went by, and hoped fervently that night would not overtake them within the environs of his farm. Mother hens clucked their chicks away from Daisy's plodding hooves, and an occasional cotton-tail scampered almost from beneath the slow-moving wagon wheels, scared out of his immobility.

Noontime found them near a neat white farmhouse.

R. P. eyed the salt pork and cold biscuits brought by Jan-sie. "Them look mighty dry," he commented jovially. "I'm going up there to that house and git some good, cold drinking water." He took a rusty bucket from under the wagon seat.

Jansie's dark brows drew together in a frown. "I wouldn't bother them folks," she said hopelessly. "They don't care nothing about people like us."

R. P. turned a look of injured dignity upon her. "Why would anybody begrudge a little drinking water?" he asked in his most effective whine. "I can't see why they would refuse a bucket of cold water to poor folks."

Jansie shrugged and sighing, turned away.

Followed by Willie, R. P. shuffled up the well-kept lane.

And presently, they were back with the water, and five fresh hen eggs that Willie just happened to find on the way.

Long before the slow-moving wagon had brought them into the city proper, the Sanders saw that Fort Worth had indeed changed since their last trip. The great, sprawling mass of Camp Bowie lay, like a visitation from another world, across the face of the nearby prairie. The streets of the cattle town were alive with khaki-clad figures.

R. P. piloted Daisy through the unexpected masses of traffic, and studied the lay of the land with bewildered eyes. "You know," he said in a meek voice, "this here is gitting worse."

"It sure is busier than it used to be," Annie agreed amiably.

Willie was beside himself with excitement, and kept up a constant uproar of interchanges with passersby. His big body shook the rickety wagon with the force of his exuberance.

Jansie sat hunched on the board seat beside Chris, and the quick, darting glance of her black eyes noted their progress. "Hush up, you Willie," she would admonish now and then, but her voice was abstracted.

Chris forgot the schoolbooks in her lap, forgot to be sensitive to the spectacle they must be making, and just looked, absorbed in the wonders about her. A young soldier, catching sight of the sweet face under the ruffled sunbonnet, waved a friendly hand, and, pleased, Chris waved back.

"Don't you be waving at no soldiers, Chris," Jansie admonished her. "Don't you be paying no attention to soldiers all the time we're here. You hear me?"

Chris nodded meekly and wondered why she shouldn't wave at a nice looking soldier like that.

Harassed by honking horns and exasperated shouts, the old wagon creaked on.

In the end it was all too much for R. P. Turning the wagon in the middle of a busy block, to the tune of shrieking brakes and unnoticed wrath, he remarked to Annie, "I ain't going on into the city tonight. I'm going back out there to the edge of town and we'll find us a good camping place. This here town has changed." And his voice was subdued.

Annie nodded happily, agreeable to anything, while Chris and Jansie sighed with relief.

Back along the road to Collins they went, and as the distances between the small suburban houses increased, R. P.'s self-confidence revived. "You all be looking for a likely camping place," he told them. "We've got to get near a creek, so we can get water."

A likely place was finally found less than a mile from a suburban center. It was on a creek and near the road, and didn't seem to belong too definitely to the prosperous-looking farmhouse on the nearby hill.

R. P. drew the wagon to a stop with a grunt of satisfaction. "There she is," he told them proudly. "A mighty good place too, if I do say so, as shouldn't."

Jansie looked about at the not-too-distant buildings of the farm, at the busy highway off which they had just come, and at the skyline of Fort Worth in the distance. "You reckon anybody'll care if we do camp here?" she asked anxiously. "We don't want to be run off."

R. P. threw down a couple of quilt rolls. "I found us a good place to camp, and here we stay," he told Jansie firmly, then added, with less fire, "I don't reckon anybody'll bother us noway."

Willie was hopping about on the grass and throwing sticks down the steep embankment to the sluggish-looking creek below. Annie eased her bulk down from the sagging seat with gentle cluckings, while Chris scrambled lightly to the ground and stretched wearily. "I'm sure tired," she told Jansie, and

felt her back to locate the sore spots caused by three days of bumping on the springless board, and two nights of sleeping on the ground.

"We'll camp here tonight, and then go into the city to-morrer," R. P. planned. "Now, Jansie, while you're getting supper, I'll just stretch out here and take a little nap. Driving sure has left the old man tired!"

The next morning, prepared by the experiences of the day before, R. P. drove the wagon through the edges of the busier sections to a ramshackle grocery in a poor part of town. "We'll leave the wagon here," he told his family with sure generalship, "and we can git started."

The proprietor of the store agreed to watch the wagon, and R. P. unloaded his troop efficiently. "Here now, you Jansie, you hold my geetar, while I git Mamma down," and he reached up to help Annie get her weight down to the pavement.

Then Jansie surrendered the instrument while she struggled down over the wheel. "I don't see why Chris has to go," she told R. P. "She can just stay here, and play with them children." She glanced over to where a group of staring-eyed children peered around the corner of the store.

R. P. looked hurt. "Why, I wouldn't be leaving little Chrissie," he said sternly. "She'd better come right along with the rest of us." He took a tin cup from under the wagon seat and gave it to Jansie, then, with elaborate courtesy, held out an arm for Annie's hand. Swinging his guitar around in front of him, he struck a chord, "Hmmmmm," he cocked an ear and sounded a nasal note.

"Hmmmmm," came Annie's plaintive alto harmony.

Admiringly, the groceryman and the children watched them. "You sure ought to do good," the groceryman assured R. P. "The town's full of folks."

Willie shuffled about them in scatterbrained happiness, while Jansie plodded beside Annie, her dark face bitter and the hated tin cup in her long hand. Chris, with the matter-of-factness of half-remembered experience, took Jansie's free hand and fell into step beside her.

They proceeded thus up the street, the enormous-bodied, simple-faced woman clinging to the arm of the sad-eyed old man, both of them singing wistfully, while the afflicted girl followed after, her dark bitterness in sharp contrast to the beauty of the child holding to her hand. The half-wit boy circled happily about them.

"Oh, do not dee-sert me," came Annie's mournful plaint, "Th' fair maiden cried," and R. P.'s guitar sobbed in wailing accompaniment.

"But when he had left her," R. P.'s nasal tenor chimed in with the irresistible impulse to harmony, "She laid down and died."

Inspired by the reinforcement, Annie grew louder, "And ever th' rosessss, bloomed fair on her grave."

Slowly, they moved toward the busier streets, and now and then a dime clattered into the cup. R. P. acknowledged these contributions with a stately nod, but lost not a note of the song. An occasional glance of pity fell on Chris' unconscious head, but was met by such a black glare of proud rage from Jansie that the glancer almost shrank back, suddenly aware of an inexplicable sense of guilt.

At last the little procession came to a stop near a prosperous looking corner. R. P. cocked a wary eye for possible complications with the law, and the family settled down for a good run. When the pile in the tin cup grew too noticeable, R. P. quickly transferred the contents to a ready pocket and presented an empty looking cup to the generous eye of his fellow-man, salted, so to speak, with a lone nickel, a sort of nest egg to stimulate the impulses of human kindness.

A soldier came up, flanked by two companions, and sheepishly deposited a dollar bill in the cup. Plainly dressed women paused to gaze at Chris' loveliness and then with drawn down mouths, to deposit quarters.

Jansie stood, the cup clutched stiffly in a white-knuckled hand, and saw it all. She was acutely conscious of the picture that they all made, but the thing that was like a knife in her heart was the pity for Chris.

"It just ain't right," she muttered helplessly under her breath. "It just ain't right, that's what it ain't."

She looked at Chris' soft dark curls and the clean hands and neatly ironed dress. "She ain't so pitiful as all that," she told herself fiercely. "I guess I've kept her clean and decent, and if she wasn't with us, she'd look like any other little girl."

A woman, silly and flashily dressed, came laughing down the street with a soldier. Attracted by the sound of the singing, she paused and caught sight of Chris. "Oh! Ain't that the prettiest little girl!" She sighed benevolently. "She's so sweet!" and, leaning past the soldier a little too closely, she deposited a dollar in Jansie's cup.

R. P. beamed and paused in his song long enough to tip his hat. "Thank you, Lady," he whined. "Thank yore kind heart."

The woman departed in careful dignity.

Tears of rage flew into Jansie's eyes. "Who does she think she is!" she whispered to herself, but felt no better for her defiance.

Out of the red film of outraged pride that was momentarily obscuring the world, she became aware of a hand tugging at her own. "Jansie!" Chris was trying to get her attention. "Jansie, there's a library over there across the street. That's what it says, 'Public Library'. Can I go over there for a little while? I want to see what it's like inside. The teacher told us about libraries."

Jansie looked at the imposing facade across from them, and her heart quailed at the magnitude of the adventure proposed by her chick. Then she looked about her at their own group, and driven by the courage of desperation, she nodded grimly. "I reckon you can go," she agreed hoarsely, "but you be careful how you cross that street! And don't you stay too long in there, and don't you talk to no strangers, either!"

Chris promised blithely and sped away, serenely confident in her own ability to look after herself.

Horried at what she had done, Jansie watched her child disappear into the yawning maw of the building opposite, headed for she knew not what.

And standing just inside the great doors, Chris was almost as overawed as Jansie herself. She hesitated and looked about her. A broad desk stood in a prominent position near the door, and Chris wondered for a panic-stricken moment if the woman behind it would ask for a fee of admission. But the neat gray head of the woman merely nodded at the frightened little girl, then bent again over the card files.

Dazed at her own temerity in ever coming here at all, Chris stood rooted. Presently, the woman at the desk looked up again, and her pince-nez gleamed in the light. "Did you want something, dear?" she asked.

Emboldened by the kindly tone, Chris moved a step nearer. "Is— is this here a Public Library?" she asked hoarsely.

"Yes, it is," the woman smilingly agreed, and waited.

"Can — can I see some books?" Chris swallowed hard.

"Of course," the woman answered in a puzzled tone, and coming from behind the desk, she motioned for Chris to follow and moved toward some chairs and tables in an alcove. "Here's the children's department. You just look at any of the books, and sit here and read, if you want to. If you find something that you'd like to take home, come to me, and I'll find your card. You have a card, haven't you?"

Chris shook her head. "No, Ma'am, I guess not. You see, I don't live in this town."

"Oh, I see." The librarian nodded regretfully. "Well, anyway, you can look around all you want to, and stay as long as you like."

Turning, she went back to her station behind the desk.

Alone, Chris stood frozen in the middle of the children's room, utterly overcome by books. "Oh, my goodness," she breathed fervently. "All them books!"

As one in a dream, she moved to the nearest shelf and gently stroked the bindings. It did not occur to her to take one from the shelves to read, but catching sight of a colorful picture book lying open on a table, she moved toward it

as if hypnotized. It was too young for her, but she read it from cover to cover with intent concentration, then moved on to the next one, indiscriminately.

Not a line of type, not a tint in the drawings, escaped her. The minutes ticked by, and she lost all sense of time. Noon came and went and she read on, unaware of hunger. She was feeding, as only a starveling can feed.

At last there was a movement beside her and she looked up. It was the librarian. "Can I help you, dear?" she asked gently. "Wouldn't you like for me to find you some more books to read besides these on the tables?"

Chris came back from heaven with a painful wrench. "Oh!" She jumped up. "I been here a long time and Jansie said—Oh!—!" Then remembering her manners she turned to the librarian. "Thank you kindly, Ma'am. I'd like to stay and read some more, but I reckon I'd better be going!"

And down the marble steps of the foyer she fled, a scared little girl in a big, ruffled sunbonnet.

Outside, she looked across the street and her heart sank. The family was gone! They had given her up and gone on without her. Horrified, Chris stood still on the sidewalk, and tears pressed against her throat.

There was a touch on her arm, and she whirled nervously. Jansie stood beside her, looking at her with frightened eyes. "What made you stay so long, Chrissie?" demanded Jansie in a voice roughened with the strain of the long vigil. "You just about scared me to death!"

At the sight of Jansie, Chris burst into tears of relief and over-wrought emotion. "Oh, Jansie!" she wept, "I didn't mean to stay so long. I just got to reading, and I didn't mean to!" And with a howl of contrition and dismay, she threw herself into the thin, brown arms.

"There now, honey." Jansie's anger melted. "There, now, honey, don't you cry. Jansie ain't mad. We'll just go on now, because they'll be waiting for us at the wagon, and it's getting late."

So, with eyes red from crying and long reading, a subdued Chris walked beside Jansie toward the grocery where the

wagon and family waited. But presently, she came out of the deep abstraction of her thoughts, and asked, "Why didn't you come in there and get me, Jansie?"

Jansie's eyes were sick with the awful pain of ignorance as she answered. "I was scared to, Chris," she said simply.

"Oh," Chris walked along in silence for a long moment, then with the selfish forgetfulness of childhood, she came back to her own more interesting emotions. "Jansie, you know what I'm going to have some day when I'm rich?" she burst out.

Jansie smiled a patient interrogation.

"I'm going to have," Chris announced in an impressive voice, "I'm going to have me one of them library cards!"



7

JANSIE stood in the wide doorway of the smithy, waiting for Chris to come out for a walk. She looked out upon the shimmering day and wondered why Sunday morning in July was like no other time. Even the lazy cackling that came from the scrub where Annie's nondescript hens had found a stolen nest, was different somehow. Over the sunlit prairie and the sleepy, low-built town in the distance, lay a seemingly unbreakable bowl of peace. Only against the far reaches of the horizon, where heavy thunderheads darkened in threatening conclave, was there any disturbance of the Sabbath calm of the glassy sky. And now and then, a mutter warned the listener that all was not peace.

Within the crippled girl, there was no quiet of acceptance. The heat of something growing was strong within the twisted body, and Jansie's inner storm was muttering. For ever since their return from that soul-scarring trip to Fort Worth in the spring, she had come to know, with a grim certainty that bor-

dered on obsession, that she and Chris would never go again. Never again would she stand before staring crowds and exhibit, for the eyes of the curious and the pitying, the affliction of which she had found, since her conversion, that she was no longer ashamed.

"I reckon that if He had to stand so much more than me," she would tell herself with a new and groping serenity, "I haven't got a thing to be ashamed of."

In the years that had slipped by since her conversion in the brush arbor, she had given little thought to prayer as such. When occasion had arisen that she had felt the need of power beyond her own limited range, she'd found herself talking to God about the problem, but it had always been a matter-of-fact conversational thing. In the back of her head, she knew that there was a correct way to pray, somewhat like the established pose of the child Samuel in the lithographed pictures that occasionally found their way into the shanty, but, so far, she hadn't got around to learning it. She resolved, when the matter of bringing up Chris had been attended to, and she had the time, to learn to talk to the Almighty in the prescribed manner. But in the meantime, she guessed she'd just go on snapping out at Him like she sometimes did with the folks here at home.

And this, as she waited for Chris to come out, she was doing today. "I'm telling You," she remarked bitterly as she looked up into the sky, "it ain't right for me to go begging on street corners and I reckon it's up to You to get me out of it. Chris has got to have things for school, clothes and hair ribbons and books and such, and I'm doing the best I can. But You're going to have to help me get them! Of course," she assured Him in a reasonable tone, "I'm not expecting You to rain 'em from Heaven or anything like that. But," she said firmly, "I am expecting a chance for Chris and I guess You'll just have to help me get it for her." Then she added by way of explanation, "Nobody else is interested."

Before He could more than mutter in the summer thunder by way of answer, Jansie felt a touch on her arm. "Ready, Jansie?" asked Chris.

Whereupon, the hunchbacked girl gave a last reminding glance toward the noncommittal blue of the summer sky, and picking up her sunbonnet, she smiled at the child, and shuffled beside her out into the morning sunlight.

The world that lay about them on the unbounded reaches of the prairie was gay with small life, but overhead, the vanguard of the storm was already appearing.

They came to the knoll, and Jansie sat down on the warm grass and curled her arms about her knees. The sweet lushness of the growing earth came up to her from the pressed down grass beneath her, and, above her head, even the small stature of the scrub-oaks assumed the dignity of trees. Somewhere in the distance, a quail whistled, and nearby a cicada shrilled his false denial of the portent of the checkering shadows that came and went over the face of the prairie.

Chris jumped about with the light joyousness, the seeming weightlessness of healthy childhood. "Come on, Jansie," she called, "let's go on and take our walk. It's going to storm after a while. Come on, Jansie!"

"All right, all right!" Jansie grumbly shuffled to her feet and started for the open prairie. But there was within her only a happy delight in Chris' fleet limbs and whole body.

And as they walked, Chris frolicked and flirted with the whole summer world about them. "It's pretty out here on the prairie, isn't it, Jansie?" she demanded, and raced ahead and back to the slower crippled girl with an aimless exuberance. "It's so beautiful, I could just die!" And she flung out her arms to the wideness about her.

Jansie smiled at her, and the somber dark face was bright for a moment. "Yes, it is mighty pretty, Chrissie," she agreed casually. But in her heart, she was wondering if any child had ever been so lovely as Chris.

She reached out a long hand and gently tugged at the wild, soft strands of Chris' hair. "Why don't you ever comb your hair, anyway, Chrissie?" she demanded softly.

But the day was darkening about them as they walked, and now and then Jansie looked at the sky with troubled eyes.

Completely unconcerned, Chris flitted from side to side of the rutted prairie road into which they had come, and her prancing was like the antics of some small, foolish wild thing.

Jansie watched the little girl, and her deformed shoulders bent almost visibly under the weight of their responsibility.

"It's going to rain, Chrissie," she said presently. "We've got to turn back." And then she added, half to herself, with a worried look at the clouds, "And I'll admit that them clouds look too yellow to suit me!"

And all about them, the prairie seemed to wait, breathless and suddenly still, in the yellowish half light, for the striking hand of the storm. The little creatures of the earth were abruptly silent about them. A cottontail scurried across the road, caught out on some prolonged expedition of his own, and hurrying for cover under the unreasoning pressure of his instinct. Deep black thunderheads piled higher and higher in the northwest sky and a few tentative raindrops flipped small craters of dust in the road before them.

Jansie quickened her steps and called to Chris to hurry.

But the storm was a faster traveller than the two small figures in the lane. They were going past the Cockrill place now, and the shanty was still almost a mile away. Jansie looked about them with anxious eyes and knew that they'd never make it before the storm caught them.

But there was no thought within her of seeking shelter in the comfortable white farmhouse standing in its flower gardens and plowed fields. The Cockrills and the Sanders had lived less than a mile apart for twenty years, but not even the strangely squirming muddiness of the cloud suggested to the hunchbacked girl that the Cockrills would care whether she and Chris were caught out or not. The Cockrills and the Sanders were just different kinds of people!

But to Grandma Cockrill, who came out into the backyard of the white house at this moment, there was less nicety of distinction. She paused for a moment, a shrivelled, arrogant little figure, peering through the whipping dust of the storm's beginnings, trying to see who was going by in the road.

"Here, you!" she shrilled to them with all the assurance of years of ruling a large and assorted family, "You two come in here quick! That cloud looks like a twister!"

The tiny, starched-ginghamed figure standing unruffled and serene under the portentous cloud was unexpectedly commanding. Jansie and Chris hesitated a moment, then turned obediently toward the Cockrill yard and the storm cellar.

"My goodness!" Grandma Cockrill stood gazing at the cloud as they came up. "Ain't that awful?" She shook her head with happy awe, and briskly herded the girls toward where Ben Cockrill, her big middle-aged son, stood bracing the already jerking cellar door, his face anxious.

"Come on, Maw," he called above the deepening tone of the wind. "Better hurry!" But even in his urgency, his tone was respectful.

But Grandma Cockrill moved with a dignity that no storm could disturb. "Now, Ben," she said firmly, "Don't get all wrought up. It may blow over."

Jansie looked back as she followed Chris down the slanting dirt steps, and doubted. High overhead, gray clouds swirled in angry confusion, and a high whistling shrilled as if expressing the indignation of some giant rage. On the ground, puffs of wind and squalls of raindrops struck here and there, not seeming to be able to coordinate or go in any certain direction. And as she watched, a strong hand grasped Jansie's arm, and she felt herself eased downward into the cellar. "Better come on in," Ben Cockrill told her. "It don't look so good."

The strange, dull peace of underground came up at her as she groped her way toward the glowing kerosene lamp in the middle of the cellar. Deep scents of long-shut-up dampness and homemade cement lay heavy in the air, and after the noises of the storm, the silence seemed a tangible thing.

Grandma Cockrill was already established in a battered rocking chair, and Chris, with the easy adjustment of childhood, sat beside her on the edge of a mildewed cot.

"Here, girl," the old lady glanced at Jansie and shoved a homemade stool forward to the circle of light cast by the

lamp on the floor, "you sit down here and rest easy. That storm ain't going to blow over in a minute. How does it look, Ben?" she enquired, "Is it going to be a twister?"

Holding tightly to the rope that held the door, the big man inched up the door itself and peered out through the aperture. "That I don't know, Maw," he remarked, and letting the door fall back, he twisted the rope around a spike beside the steps and came on down into the cellar. "Right now, it's a bad-looking cloud." Taking off a large, sweatstained hat, he mopped placidly at his broad face and sat down on the cot, smiling at Chris. "Good thing you girls weren't caught out in it," he remarked cheerfully to Jansie.

Grandma Cockrill reached into the pocket of her blue-and-white checked apron, and extracted a large ball of thin thread and a bewildering array of needles. "Ain't you the Sanders girl that got religion at the revival meetin' eight, nine years ago?" she asked, as she unwound a short length of filmy lace and, drawing out the connecting thread, put the ball into her pocket. "One morning, it was."

"Why, yes'm," Jansie's tone was startled, "I— I did."

"Now, what's your name?" Grandma Cockrill adjusted the thin steel of the needles and took a few careful stitches. "I've seen you girls around lots of times, when we went to town, but I don't believe I know your names." She cocked a birdlike eye at them.

"I'm Jansie Sanders," Jansie told her, "and this is Chris, my — little sister."

"I haven't seen you at church, though," the old lady remarked. "Have you backslid?"

Jansie was bewildered. "No, Ma'am," she said hesitantly, not knowing what backsliding was, but being sure that it was something to be avoided. "I don't reckon I've done that. I reckon—"

Grandma asked the same question again in less technical terms. "You still got religion?" she asked.

"Oh!" Jansie's tone was relieved. "Oh, yes'm!"

Grandma Cockrill nodded with a satisfied air and ducked her tight pepper-and-salt topknot toward Chris. "Is the little girl in Sunday School?" she asked.

"Who? Chris?" Jansie asked. "No Ma'am, she ain't."

The old lady did not answer for a long moment, while the two visitors sat watching her knit. "She ought to be," she announced presently. "You both ought to be."

"I don't want to go nowheres that people will be staring at me," Jansie said with a stiff defensiveness. "I don't like people."

Grandma Cockrill looked unperturbed. "How old are you, girl?" she asked, and the filmy length of lace grew slowly under her flying needles.

"Twenty-eight." Jansie's answer was sullen. "Old enough to know my own mind!"

Grandma Cockrill clicked her tongue reproachfully. "Old enough to stop worrying about what other people think, too!" she told the crippled girl. "It's a shame for a sweet little girl like her not to go to Sunday School." She nodded again toward Chris. "She ought to be learning the Bible and how to do right."

Confronted with this angle of the matter, Jansie sat looking at Chris with darkly brooding eyes, but made no answer.

Not seeming to notice the crippled girl's silence, Grandma Cockrill held up the delicate lengths of her handiwork. "See this?" she said to Jansie in the tone of one woman to another. "This is a thing mighty few people can do."

Relieved to be free of the distasteful subject of Sunday School, Jansie reached out a long finger and touched the fine stitches. "It's pretty," she agreed. "It's mighty pretty!"

Grandma Cockrill settled more comfortably into the rocking chair. "Not very many knitters, even, can knit lace," she said with a placid smugness. "My Granny taught me when I was a little girl back in Kentucky. Now, my daughters think tatting is fine! Humph, tatting—" — Her bright eyes snapped. "Anybody can tat! And I haven't a girl that can sit down and knit up a length of lace like that 'un." She held up the stuff for the crippled girl's admiration.

"This is called the sea-shell pattern. It has to be a sort of talent, I guess, like painting pictures or writing poems!"

Completely impressed, Jansie picked up one end of the lace. "It's pretty," she said again.

Ben Cockrill eyed her long hands. "I wouldn't be surprised if she could do it, though, Maw," he suggested gently. "Her hands look mighty competent."

Grandma Cockrill looked surprised, then leaning over, she gazed judiciously down at Jansie's hands. "You know, she just might be able to, at that," she admitted thoughtfully. Then, before Jansie could draw back, she held out the thread and needles. "Want to try? You can go right on with this piece."

Jansie swallowed hard. "Oh, I couldn't—" she faltered.

She wiped the palms of her hands nervously on her skirt.

Fascinated by the turn of events, Chris wriggled nearer on her cot. "Go on, Jansie," she encouraged. "Go on and see if you can't do it!"

Jansie, her fingers already reaching for the beautiful stuff, laughed sheepishly. "I — I reckon I'll try!" she agreed and accepting the lace, gave the needles a tentative twist.

Grandma Cockrill laughed gently and ordered, "See here, it's this way. You do this — and this," She guided the fingers. "And this—"

Suddenly absorbed, Jansie did that — and that — and that—

Outside, the storm blew in rage and beating wind, but within the cellar, there was only the soft hiss of the rain in the tin ventilator pipe and the gentle click of Grandma Cockrill's false teeth as she gave instruction in her art. And added to these usual ones was the noise of Jansie's hoarsely absorbed breathing as her long, hungry fingers struggled to create beauty.



8

BUT I don't *want* to go to Sunday School, Jansie!" Chris stood in well-scrubbed discomfort beside the three-legged bureau in Annie's room, where Jansie was putting the finishing touches to a grim toilet. "It's bad enough to have to go to school, without having to go to Sunday School, too! They dress awful fine on Sunday!"

Jansie's dark face was set with determination and nervousness as she maneuvered her timeless best hat well down on her head, especially in front. It was almost as if she hoped to hide beneath its familiar and uncritical brim. Out of it her face peered with a monkeylike alertness. "That just goes to show," she told Chris with a forced conviction, "that Miz Cockrill was right! You need to be learning things about religion and right and wrong!" She paused and added in a falling tone, "I reckon Christian people won't laugh at your clothes!"

Deeply unconvinced, Chris sighed and watched the faded roses bob nervously under Jansie's quivering fingers. "But why do I have to wear my hair so tight?" she enquired plaintively, as she scratched at the stiff braids into which Jansie had jerked the usual soft curls. "I can't even sit down!"

Jansie turned and seriously surveyed the starchy, ginghamed little figure from the stiff braids to the well-blacked, scuffed toes of the school shoes. "You can, too, sit down," she said shortly. "And you're not supposed to be comfortable in church. Braids look more — more dignified."

She turned back to the bureau, and reaching into a drawer, took out her battered purse. She gripped it firmly, and turned toward the door. "Come on, Chris," she said in the tone of one going to execution, "let's go!"

Outside, in the smithy, R. P., Annie, and Willie stood waiting to see them off, R. P. with considerable irritation, but Annie with a sort of shy pride.

"Humph!" R. P. looked at the anxious neatness of their appearance, and spat contemptuously through the smithy door. "Getting kind of biggety, ain't you, Jansie? You don't reckon them church folks is going to be glad to see the likes of you, do you?"

Jansie refused to meet his eyes. "We're just going to Sunday School," she said defensively. "Ain't nothing so awful or so grand, either, about that!"

R. P.'s answering tone was almost a snarl, and there was in it all the bitterness of uncertainty. "Well, don't you let me catch you putting on no airs," he remarked as he walked away, "or I'll whip you and Chris to an inch of your life! I ain't going to have no smart alecks around here!"

When he had gone, Annie reached over and patted Jansie with a heavy hand. "Don't you pay no attention to him, Jansie," she said in her whining voice. "You and Chrissie go right on to Sunday School and have a nice time and learn the lesson." Her pale eyes grew prideful. "Here's a nickel for the collection. You see," she explained, as she held out the coin, "I went to Sunday School, too, when *I* was a little

girl. And," she added proudly, "I got religion once myself, too! Wasn't nobody could shout louder than me!"

Jansie looked at her with startled eyes. "Did you, Maw? What happened?"

The blue eyes grew filmed. "Well, I sort of — of stopped going after your paw and me was married —" and Annie's voice trailed off into silence.

"Oh." Jansie stood staring at the fat woman with more understanding in her eyes. "Oh, I see. Well, I reckon we'd better be going, Chris," she added quietly.

It was all very well for Miz Cockrill to tell them to go to Sunday School, Jansie thought as she and Chris passed the watering trough in front of the Elite Livery stable, but what Sunday School? Before them as they came down the dusty little Main Street of the town, were ranged the assorted array of steepled, wooden churches. And each pair of double doors seemed more mysterious, not to say, forbidding, than the one before it. They paused in front of the Sabbath-shuttered plate glass of the First State Bank, and surveyed the field with bewildered eyes.

"Which one are we supposed to go to, Jansie?" Chris asked.

Jansie shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted worriedly. "Miz Cockrill didn't say, and I didn't think to ask her. I — I reckon we'll just have to wait here and see which folks goes where."

At last, as they stood watching the well-dressed townspeople going past and sorting themselves into the various doors with inexplicable assurance, Jansie had her lead. A country family, having hitched their wagon and team back of the livery stable, came by in well-washed but shabby Sunday presentability. Jansie looked upon them with all the favor of one lost in a strange land. "We'll go where them folks goes," she told Chris, and took the little girl's hand. "We'll follow them."

The country family turned into a square white church with only a little steeple, one of the less beautiful buildings. Jansie led Chris firmly behind them.

So Jansie and Chris became Baptists.

Just inside the door, they were accosted by an official greeter. "Well, well," the man allowed himself only a shadow of the pitying, curious stare that Jansie's affliction usually evoked. "Here are some new pupils! Now let me see, do I know your names?"

"I reckon not," Jansie admitted. "I'm Jansie Sanders and this here is Chris, my — er — little sister."

"Fine, fine," The man's eyes glazed with the sightless cordiality of his kind, and before the girls had time to realize what was happening, they were eased into the hands of the Sunday School superintendent, thence into the care of beaming teachers. Presently, Jansie found herself settled in a women's class, looking at the backs of heads and listening to a lesson. Chris, in the efficient hands of a beautifully clean young woman, had disappeared into the Junior Department.

When the sensation of whirling had eased somewhat within her, and she had begun to gain some sense from the words of the elderly teacher at the front of the class, Jansie realized that they were discussing someone called the prodigal son. From what she could glean from the discussion that went on about her, he must have been a pretty sorry fellow, but he seemed to come out all right in the end.

And it was while she was still occupied with the problems of the prodigal son, that Sunday School melted into church with an imperceptible precision. A hidden bell rang, brisk ushers swept back dividing curtains, Chris came in to sit beside her and the organist pumped vigorously into a brisk gospel song. And there they were, suddenly, in church! Chris and Jansie stood up firmly with all the aplomb of seasoned church-goers, and lifted their voices with the rest. This was getting easier as they went along.

Jansie listened to the sermon with considerable interest. She studied the earnest, loud-voiced young preacher, who was the best that a small place like Collins could command, with sympathetic eyes. But she heartily disagreed with a good part of his message.

Take that matter of the man blind from birth, for instance. The preacher dwelt dramatically on the healing part of the story, but Jansie decided that it would be a mighty lot more convincing if the preacher had seemed to know how it *felt* to be blind! Jansie herself hadn't been blind either, but somehow, in that instant, she knew its agony.

And as the young man swept into the crescendo of his discourse, he made much of the fact that the blind man's affliction was "for God's will." Jansie sat, her chin pressed absently into her long hand, wondering why anybody wouldn't be willing to be blind for a while if it were only to know the ecstasy of the healing hands of the Master!

But when the service was over, and the crowd began filing toward the open doors, the crippled girl looked about her with a full return of self-consciousness. What did all these handshaking, cheerful, gossiping people have to do with her and Chris, anyway! Paw was right. She'd got too biggety!

Nervously, she herded Chris before her toward the blessed release of the wide doors. Just let them get out of here and she'd know her place from now on, she reckoned!

No one spoke to them.

And then, when they were almost to the doors, a tiny, peppery little figure popped out of a group of women. "My sakes, you did come to church, didn't you?" Grandma Cockrill beamed upon the girls. "Did you come to Sunday School, too?" she demanded. Then as Jansie kept inching toward the door, she added, "Wait a minute, I want you to meet some of the other ladies." And with bright, knowing eyes she searched the crowd about them for a victim.

Mrs. Smalling, the doctor's wife, very elegant in a new hat with much veiling, swept by.

Grandma Cockrill, still holding firmly to Jansie's arm, swooped. "Miz Smalling!"

Mrs. Smalling, trapped, stopped. And being both a Christian and a good wife for a public servant, she made the most of the inevitable. "Why, Jansie." She held out a friendly hand as if it were the most natural thing in the world to be

greeting the crippled Sanders girl. "We're glad to see you and — er — your little sister here in church!"

Jansie took the hand with tentative fingers and tried to smile back, "Yes'm," she agreed uncertainly, then blurted, "I reckoned it was about time for Chris to be coming to Sunday School!"

Mrs. Smalling winced at the vicious prod of her own conscience, and nodded approvingly. "That's right," she agreed. "She should be in Sunday School, and I'm glad you both came —" she paused and still goaded by Grandma Cockrill's wise eyes and her own Christian principles, she added, "Wouldn't you — er — like to come to Ladies' Aid, Jansie? It meets at my house this week."

Jansie stared up at the tall, elegant woman in utter amazement. "Why, I —" She stopped and gulped a swallow in a dry throat. "Why, I dunno —"

"Of course you can," Grandma Cockrill chimed in. "You can go along with me."

"We just do fancy work and have a lesson," Mrs. Smalling wondered vaguely if she weren't pushing the second-mile business a little too far. "I thought maybe you'd enjoy it."

Jansie could only nod dumbly.

"You bring your fancy work." Mrs. Smalling was beginning to ease away. "The meeting's at two, on Thursday."

A great wave of happiness broke over Jansie. She had a dazzling mental picture of herself in a roomful of women, nice women, doing fancy work! It was almost more than she could bear! "Yes'm," she answered the retreating woman, "I been learning to knit lace!"

"Fine!" Mrs. Smalling smiled, half pleased with herself. "I've never learned to knit lace."

"Yes'm," Jansie said again, then she added, "But Miz Cockrill here says most people can't learn to do it. It's a sort of special talent, she says!"

Grandma Cockrill nodded vigorous agreement. "That's right!"

Mrs. Smalling smiled weakly and melted into the crowd.

"You be ready Thursday afternoon," Grandma Cockrill patted the hunchbacked girl's arm, "And I'll come by for you." And with a final reassuring pat, she too moved away.

Jansie took Chris' hand and, lifting her head, she surveyed the unnoticing people about them with a rich new sense of established respectability and headed for the door.

Chris was silent all the way home. But when, at last, they were within sight of the shanty door, the little girl spoke. "Jansie," she said in thoughtful voice, "You've got religion, haven't you?"

Jansie came out of her own absorbing thoughts and looked down into the hazel-green eyes. "Yes," she admitted. "Why, Chris?"

"Well," the upturned eyes were candid, "all the other girls belong to the church, all the nicest ones."

"Is that right?" Jansie frowned thoughtfully.

Chris nodded. "Yes, and Jansie, I want to join the church and be baptized, too! Can I?"

Jansie walked along in puzzled silence for a long moment, but at last she sighed and gave it up. "I reckon so, honey," she agreed slowly, and reaching over, she hugged the little girl with an unaccustomed gesture of deep affection. "I reckon that'll be all right."

And Chris skipped happily on into the shanty.



9

THERE'S one thing I'm mighty thankful for, Annie." R. P. edged his splintbottomed chair closer to the stove and poked at the coals with a short stick, for the February wind was cold. "It was a blessing, after all, that Joe had to lay out them months in jail over in Hackberry County last year. He didn't get caught in no draft, anyway."

Annie, her big body ponderously swaying in her rocking chair, nodded comfortably. "That's right, Mister Sanders," she agreed. "I'd hate to think of poor Joey in the army, getting shot at." She shook her head in sympathetic distress. "I'm glad our boys didn't have to go."

Jansie, who was sitting by the table, her fingers busy at their endless lace knitting, glanced up, then looked over to where Willie's moon-face stared out at them from behind the stove. "There's other things keep people from going into the army," she muttered, and her thoughts were mixed with bitterness and pity.

Chris looked up from her book. She was sitting across the table, on which the lamp glowed feebly against the darkening day. Her notebook and pencil lay near her hand. She was in the first year of high school now and the work was hard. Collins, growing with the waxing prosperity of the century and the war, now boasted a small red brick high school and two grammar schools, on opposite sides of the tracks.

There was even a Chamber of Commerce now, to look after the interests of the community, and the cotton gin down by the Katy tracks was no longer the center of the industrial life of the town. Long trains of tank cars from farther west shunted up and down the railway these days, bearing a newer and more exciting commodity than cotton. Collins was basking in the reflected glory of the spreading oil fields.

"Where is Joe, now?" Chris asked, and closing her book with a tired sigh, she leaned back in her chair. "He hasn't been home in a week."

R. P. leaned back and propped his feet against the edge of the stove. "He's on a big business deal right now," he told the others, and his tone was important. "That boy is plenty smart. Other people have to work like dogs to get a little money, but not that Joe! He just uses his head!"

Jansie looked quietly at the old man, and her dark face was sad and disgusted, but she turned back to her work without comment.

Annie nodded proudly, and smiled into the glow of the fire. "He always was a good boy," she murmured vaguely. "Joey is a mighty good boy!"

Willie coughed croupily into the silence that followed Annie's words. "I don't feel so good," he remarked with a plaintive wistfulness. "I ain't feeling so good a-tall."

Jansie frowned and spoke worriedly. "You better let Mamma make you a mustard plaster, Willie," she told the half-wit boy. "You sound like your cold is down into your chest."

"Miss Long has been out of school for the last two days," Chris put in. "And there were twenty absent out of the seventh and eighth grades today!"

R. P. cleared his throat. "It's that there new sickness they're talking about," he informed them. "I heard about it down at the feed store this morning. They got it all over, up north. They call it the Spanish influenzy."

Annie rocked comfortably. "It's the latter days," she told them all, in a doleful voice. "It's the end of the world, just like the Good Book says! It's the 'bomination of desolation!" She rocked sadly for a silent moment.

Annie went on aloud with her thoughts, which had returned to Willie and his cold. "I don't hold much with the doctoring folks uses these days," she said confidently. "I think a good old-fashioned mustard plaster and a good, thorough dose of Sammises Bark Potion ought to straighten Willie out. If there's a soreness in the chest, I always say a little liniment will help, too."

R. P. nodded approvingly. "I wouldn't trade one of your mustard plasters for all the new-fangled notions of doctoring in the world, Annie," he told her.

Pleased, Annie rocked cozily.

Chris sat with her forehead knit with thought. "If it's nearly the end of the world, why do I have to keep going to school, Jansie?" she asked.

Jansie's dark eyes lighted with unaccustomed amusement. "It'll give you something to do, honey," she answered gently, "while you're waiting."

And only the soft snap of the burning wood in the stove broke in contented silence in the little room.

Willie's cold was much worse the next morning, and Annie put him to bed with the threatened mustard plaster on his chest. He howled mournfully as she slapped the burning thing against his cringing flesh, but Annie was dutifully firm. "Now you hush up, Willie," she ordered plaintively. "You'll make yourself worse and I'll have to put one on your back, too!"

Willie subsided at this awful prospect, and sniffing dolefully, resigned himself to the doubtful compensation of lying in Annie's bed and watching the wind swell the magazine

covers with which Jansie had papered the walls of the bedroom.

By noon his fever was high. Annie felt of his forehead and clucked her tongue. "My goodness, you're hot as can be, Willie!" she told him in a worried tone. "It does look like you're going to have a real sick spell."

At school that week, everything was gloomy with the shadow of the growing epidemic. Classes were getting disorganized as pupils and teachers succumbed to the queer new malady. There were obvious gaps in attendance, and pupils whispered in the hallways, half apprehensive and half thrilled, as they compared notes.

"Jane Willett's family are all down, and she says she feels kind of funny."

Jane was absent the next day.

"Miz Smalling told my mother that they might have to open the Methodist church for a hospital. There are so many families with no one to wait on them!"

Rumor after rumor flew through the chilly halls, and teachers and students alike listened to them, their faces frightened.

At home, things were bad, too, for Willie grew steadily worse. Doctor Smalling, weary and whitefaced, came and looked, and shook his head. "He's mighty sick, Annie," he told the fat woman. "You and Jansie'll have to watch him closely. Maybe you'd better take him down to the Methodist Church where there'll be someone to watch him all the time."

But Annie listened to the delirious murmur of Willie's voice from the bedroom and shook her head. "No, he wouldn't like to be sick among strangers," she said simply. "Willie ain't quite right, but he has his feelings."

So, R. P., Annie and Jansie took turns sitting by the chipped iron bedstead in Annie's room, bathing the hot face and listening to the labored breathing.

"Let me stay up with Willie tonight, Jansie," Chris asked one evening as Jansie came into the kitchen and wrapped herself for the cold vigil in the bedroom. "You're awful tired. I can stay home from school tomorrow."

But Jansie shook her head. "No, you better get to bed, honey, and go on to school. I don't want you taking sick if we can help it."

So each morning, Chris trudged wearily to an increasingly disorganized school.

"I do believe they're afraid to come, even the well ones," Miss Templeton, the English teacher, told Chris one day when the class consisted of one person, Chris. "They can't all be sick."

It was the last period of the afternoon session, and the two of them were sitting in the empty classroom, discipline relaxed, just talking. "Mr. Caldwell says we may have to close school," Miss Templeton went on.

Chris sighed and tried to look interested. All day she had been burdened with this strange sense of detachment. Maybe it was because Willie was sick or something, or maybe it was because the weather was so persistently gloomy. If the sun would come out, everybody would feel better, probably. Anyway, she just couldn't seem to care much whether school had to close or not.

Miss Templeton shuffled some papers on her desk, and hesitated. "I have some notebooks to grade," she told Chris, "and since you are the only one here, it seems a little foolish to try to have a lesson. Why don't you find something interesting to read, Chris, and I'll grade my notebooks until the last bell."

Chris nodded and listlessly turned the pages of her notebook.

"Here," Miss Templeton laid a thin volume in front of the girl, "Try some of this poetry, Chris. You may like it."

Chris studied the book with curious eyes and Miss Templeton went on, "It was written by a young man who was killed in the war. I like all his poems very much."

She went back to her work.

Still with that vague feeling of being detached from her own body, Chris turned the pages of the little book, reading a word now and then. She didn't understand many of the

lines, but they caught at some thread in her nature and she felt a response to their beauty tightening within her.

Reading sketchily, she came to the back of the book.

And on the last page of the book, there was one lone sonnet.

Slowly, waiting for the last bell to ring, Chris read the words,

“‘If I should die, think only this of me,’”

And in that moment, Chris could comprehend dying. Willie was so sick, the weather was so grim, and she, herself, had this dreamy feeling of disembodiment. Dying was almost real.

So, not understanding the arbitrary form, not appreciating the masterly craftsmanship, Chris read *THE SOLDIER*—

“—*That is forever England*—”

Chris paused and thought vaguely of a distant place called England, such a long way from Texas!

“*Gave once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam*—”

Flowers, lilacs blooming by the lean-to door, and in the yard a sleepy hen cackling lazily in the spring sunlight.

“—*blessed by the suns of home*—”

Chris understood that. Home was Jansie, and fat Annie, and the poignant sweetness of the notes from Joe’s harmonica. Home was a shanty with a smithy attached.

“—*of hearts at peace, under an English heaven*—”

Inexplicably, an image of the Blue Mountains, misty and dreamlike in the distances of the prairie, came into Chris’ mind. She sat still, almost stunned by the glory of words, just words. Unbelievable vistas opened before her, vistas of a world where goodness and cleanliness and gentleness were all there was.

At this instant, the long-delayed sun chose to come out from behind curtained clouds. A great shaft of light poured through the high windows of the schoolroom. Utterly bemused, Chris raised her eyes and was one with the pouring glory of the light, one with the music of words, and one with the everlasting challenge of dreams.

The bell rang.

Miss Templeton looked up as Chris laid the book on her desk. "Like it?" she smiled, hopeful for some reaction.

But she was startled at the shining ecstasy of the wide eyes that turned upon her. "Yes'm, I do like it," Chris almost whispered in her reverence. "Oh, yes'm, I do!"

Turning, she trudged out, her schoolbooks and papers under the baggy arm of her sweater.

Miss Templeton sat very still for a long surprised moment, then shaking herself, she picked up her work. Somehow, right at this moment, it seemed like nice work, well worthwhile.

"Well," she said aloud, but very softly, "you never know, do you?" and picking up her blue grading pencil, she bent above the notebooks once more.

Doctor Smalling straightened from above Willie and shook his head. "We'll have to take him to the church," he said firmly. "He can't get the proper care here with all of you sick! You're in no condition to take care of him, Annie."

Annie fumbled at the quilts that covered the cot on which she was lying nearby, and nodded weakly. "I reckon so, Doctor," she agreed. "Mister Sanders ain't able to look after all of us, for a fact."

Jansie and Chris were both sick now, lying wearily on their cots in the kitchen. Joe was still away.

"Well," Doctor Smalling cleared his throat with a dry, scraping sound and rubbed his tired hands together. "I'll tell Jansie what to do to get you all as nearly ready as possible," he told the fat woman. "We've even got nurses from out of town helping us out down there. Collins is hardest hit of any town around here."

In the kitchen, he outlined his plans to Jansie. "You'll all have to come down to the Methodist Church," he told her firmly. "I can't just leave you all here to die. Willie's in a bad way, and you and Annie and Chris have a good deal of fever. And R. P. is no nurse."

Jansie's dark face flushed. "Why can't Paw take care of us?" she asked stubbornly. "I don't want to go down there

for all them women to be poking around, looking at our clothes."

The doctor studied the crippled girl. "I don't think you would want to take a chance on Willie's dying for lack of care, Jansie," he told her quietly, "and those women down there are far too busy to be curious about people's clothing."

So the Sanders family went down to the Methodist Church in the wagon. R. P. took them with importance and aplomb, glad to get the responsibility for so many sick folks off his hands.

"He's a mighty sick boy, Doc says," he confided to the nurse who was getting Willie to bed. "He's a mighty sick boy, Miss—?" he raised his voice in questioning friendliness.

"MacIntosh," supplied the nurse in an absent tone, jerking her mind back from frantic figurings as to how on earth they could take care of four more! "Could you bring some blankets?" Then glancing at R. P.'s clothes, she added, "Clean, freshly washed blankets?"

R. P. scratched his head and looked thoughtful. "Well, now, Ma'am, I guess we oughta be able to bring some quilts. They might not be freshly washed this winter, but—"

Miss MacIntosh threw up her hands in a small gesture of impatience and helplessness. "Never mind, never mind!" she told him, and eased him toward the door. "That'll be all right. When you want to know how your folks are getting along, come to the office there," she jerked a white-capped head toward the primary Sunday School room, "and they'll tell you. Thank you very much, and goodbye!"

And somewhat to his surprise, R. P. found himself on the outside of the door.

It was almost a week before Willie was pronounced out of danger and by that time, Annie was seriously ill. Jansie was recovering slowly, hindered by the nagging weakness of her affliction, but Chris, with the resiliency of childhood, made a rapid convalescence. Since Jansie was unable to go home, there was no one to give Chris decent meals and adequate care, so Doctor Smalling suggested that she be allowed the freedom of the makeshift wards.

Chris liked that. It was fun to wander about among the cots, gossiping with anyone who felt up to it, wobbling about on small errands for the nurses, and entertaining the very youngest patients. The clean beds and well-served food, though a barely adequate makeshift to the eyes of the trained nurses, were a miracle of efficiency and sanitation to the little girl.

R. P. appeared now and then, coughing dolefully, and insisting that he, too, would soon be a patient. But Doctor Smalling dashed his hopes. "You're fine, R. P.," he would assure the old man, and then he would add, flatteringly, "I don't understand how you have managed to stay free of it all this time."

And after a while, R. P. gained a sort of pride in his own immunity. Wasn't he one of the very few who hadn't been stricken? "It's this way," he would tell the loafers around the pot-bellied stove in the feed store, "It's this way. I just have a phy-zi-key that them germs can't get a hold on. Me and Doc Smalling know how to take care of ourselves."

It was something of a blow to his pretensions when, in the second week of his family's stay in the hospital, Doctor Smalling, too, came down with the disease and was a patient. But after thinking it over, R. P. decided that this did not detract, that it added, rather, to his own prestige as a germ-resister.

And truth to tell, he did not come down at all, though stronger and cleaner men died. Whatever the reason, R. P. did not take the flu.

Outside the hastily curtained windows of the church, spring was slipping in, unobserved. Sometimes, in the heat of the day, the nurses would allow Chris to sit outside on the wide steps at the front of the church. There she would soak in the gentle sunlight, and the warmth would soothe her weakened muscles until she would find herself watching the diminished activity of the town with half dreaming, half observant eyes. Impressions rushed into her illness-cleansed mind like water into a dry gulch of the prairies. Never afterward would she smell the scent of apple blossoms without

feeling again the lazy content of those long, motionless noontimes on the steps of the Methodist Church.

It was here that Joe found her one day. He came down the sunlit street, a tall, thin figure in an expensive cowboy hat and high-heeled boots of elaborate design. And there was about him a new air, as of a man who had charted his course, and, come what may, will abide by it. He was upon Chris before she saw him, and his freckled hands had pinioned her to the camp chair in which she was sunning.

"Well, how's the girl?" Joe asked and his tone was gentle through the habitual hardness of his voice. "How're you feeling now? Paw says you've been pretty sick."

"Joel!" Chris gave a small bounce of joy. "Where have you come from? Where have you been?"

Joe's flat-blue eyes were smiling down into hers, and his hands held her fast. "No, you don't," he said when she tried to get up. "You stay right there. How's Maw?" But he did not answer her questions.

Chris' face grew troubled. "She's awfully sick, Joe," she answered. "They're keeping one of those screens in front of her bed all the time, now."

Joe frowned and a shadow blew across his freckled face. "She getting what she needs?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," Chris assured him in an eager tone. "They're wonderful to you here, Joel! Why, when I was sick, one of them — those nurses bathed me every single day!"

Joe kicked gently at the leg of the camp chair. "If I give you some money, could you get Maw some of the things she needs or — wants, Chrissie?" he asked.

"I guess so," Chris agreed doubtfully. "But she don't really need anything, Joe. She's too sick. Why don't you just go in there and see her? She'd like that."

"Who's in there?" he asked. "Doc Smalling?"

"Doctor Smalling is in there," Chris told him. "He's had the flu, too. And nearly everyone we know has had it, and lots of them are still sick."

But Joe stood, thinking his own dark thoughts, and presently, he shook his head. "I can't go, honey," he told Chris. "I reckon I'd better get back to my — job."

He tucked a small roll of bills under her hand on the arm of the camp chair, and stood looking down at her, his face gentle with tenderness. "You're getting mighty pretty, Chris," he told her. "How're your lessons going?"

"Fine," Chris smiled up in answer. "I'm doing fine, Joe."

For a brief instant there was a flash of boyishness in the light-blue eyes. "Give your teacher my love, then," he told her teasingly, and with a quick pat for the brown curls and a quick look up and down the almost deserted street, Joe was swinging down the steps and away with elaborate casualness.

But not even money could take the screen from beside Annie's bed. And at last, one bright morning of spring sunshine, Jansie shuffled into the ward where Chris was reading a fairy story to a six-year-old, and hastily summoned her.

"What is it, Jansie?" Chris whispered as she followed the hunched figure between the cots. "What's the matter? Is Mamma worse?"

"She's dying," Jansie said briefly.

And Chris felt a chill of terrified understanding go over her flesh.

Annie was scarcely conscious as they bent above her. She fumbled at the smooth sheets, and smiled vaguely into her own thoughts. "Chrissie?" she whispered at the child's touch, and her big hand groped. "Chrissie?"

Chris nodded, then swallowed hard, and choked. "Yes'm, it's Chrissie."

Annie smiled again and her eyes groped up at the girl's face. "My baby," Annie said softly.

And was quiet.

And after a long, sobbing moment, the nurse eased Chris away, around the screen.

Unnoticed, Chris wandered about the wards, fighting the terror that was pressing against her heart, seeking a place of solitude that she might consider this thing that had happened.

At last she came upon an isolated corner in one of the Sunday School rooms, where she could huddle behind the protecting cover of stacked-up pews from the other rooms. She crouched back there, terrified as the fear and the finality of death was laid bare before her, and she was struggling to reassemble the shattered concepts of her own small world.

Vaguely, from a window high above her, she realized that the long light fell on the uncarpeted floor. Dully, she watched as the motes danced in their golden stream, and dimly, as if from some long distant past, a memory about death unfolded in her thoughts. "*If I should die.*" It was that poem she had read in school that day she got sick. And it was about dying. When you thought of it that way, dying didn't seem to be so bad, somehow. Dying could be a part of beautiful things, like—

And she groped for the thoughts that lay just out of reach, somewhere in the scarcely realized land of the senses. It was a promise of comfort, and somehow, within it, lay something of dignity, something of peace, in this matter of death —

But there were light, quick footsteps on the uncarpeted floor just outside her haven. "There," puffed an unfamiliar voice. "that's the fiftieth tray I've carried today! My arms are killing me!"

Chris shrank back farther into her haven and waited, trembling a little as another voice answered, "Well, we're sending a few home now and then, so I guess it's getting lighter."

There was a long sigh from the first voice and the scruff of a shoe near Chris' hideout. "Yep. That's right. Five went home today, nearly well."

"And the fat woman in the annex just died," said the second voice in a tone of cheerful gossip. "You know how hard it goes with all that weight!"

"Is that so?" exclaimed the first voice. "I hadn't heard. Poor soul!"

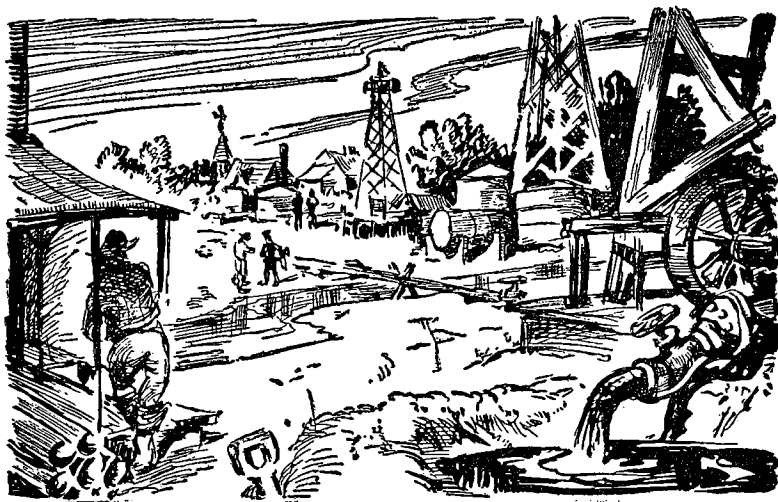
"She's better off, though," number two remarked comfortably, "and goodness knows the world is better off! She'd just be a burden on society, as that kind always are."

"Yep," said the first voice in laconic agreement, "it's a mercy when they go. People like that are no use to themselves or to anyone else much, just beggars, practically!"

"Say! I'm hungry," The second voice was already moving away. "I could eat a horse."

"Me, too," And the two sets of footsteps moved away, comfortably certain.

But behind the pushed-back pews, a thin little figure shivered into a scarcely-breathing little ball, and hazel-green eyes were hot with pain. "I'll show em," Chris muttered inarticulately, between chattering teeth. "I'll—I'll show 'em all!"



10

ANNIE's death marked an indefinable change in the life of the family. It was more than just missing the big woman around the shanty. It was even more than losing her lazy, good-natured daydreaming, her incurable hopefulness. It was the end of something, a time, and though things went on outwardly pretty much the same as before, Chris and Jansie found themselves, in later years, marking Annie's death as the time of a break in their lives.

For one thing, Jansie ruled the shanty now, in name as well as in effect. Slowly, under the long, deft hands, dark walls brightened with inexpertly applied whitewash, and the dingy furniture and splintery floors took on a scrubbed look. It was as if Jansie felt the need to eliminate all the years of easy-going filth. She took over Annie's bedroom for herself and Chris, and R. P. and the boys were shifted to the cots in the kitchen.

R. P. grumbled helplessly and retreated to the sanctuary of the smithy, though even there could be seen the insidious encroachment of a more sanitary age. Smell by smell, the scents of vulcanizing rubber and cheap motor oil were replacing the familiar odors of horse manure, scorched hooves and hot iron. No longer bolstered by the unquestioning admiration of his woman, unadjusted to the overwhelming neatness of the new dispensation, the old man seemed to shrivel, like a poor apple that has been too long under the sterilizing rays of a merciless sun.

Life was easier these days for Jansie, though. For one thing, the Ladies' Aid, for once living up to the literal meaning of its name, was helping her keep Chris in school. For the first time in her life, Chris had plenty of books, new pencils and a tiny allowance of spending money.

"It isn't as if we were wasting the Lord's money on the whole shiftless family," Mrs. Cates, the President of the society, would assure the assembled Dorcases. Mrs. Cates, being the wife of Mr. Cates, who was the cashier of the First National Bank, had a healthy respect for money, including the Lord's. "Jansie works her fingers to the bone, trying to keep that child respectable looking and in school. And Chris is a bright little thing!"

"Oh, and she's terribly pretty, too!" put in young Mrs. Willis, who had just moved to town and didn't know about things. "She's simply beautiful!"

A very silent silence followed her words. Mrs. Willis looked about her with puzzled eyes, and it would have been hard to explain to her that Chris wouldn't be *expected* to look "terribly pretty" in the things they gave her.

"You know, really," Mrs. Smalling put in cheerfully to cover the awkwardness for little Mrs. Willis, "I do think it's better to help here at home as much as we can, and then see about the heathen."

Everyone nodded, happy to have the situation smoothed over, and the Ladies' Aid stitched on, contented in the knowledge of virtue.

But it was to Grandma Cockrill that Jansie turned in moments of uncertainty. There was something in the little old woman's brisk saltiness that reached through the crippled woman's own tough shell. Over the infinite patterns and endless yards of the knitted lace, the two settled many questions.

There was the problem of Joe. "It ain't that Joe's such a bad boy, Miz Cockrill." Jansie put a tiny flourish in the rising sun pattern that was quickly shaping under her fingers. "He's just ignorant and them fellows pull him around by the nose."

"I know." A small sigh pushed itself out between Grandma Cockrill's lips. "I know, Jansie, and there's not much you can do about it! No man wants to be bossed by a woman, and somehow, I've always noticed that the more ignorant they are, the more it hurts them to admit they're wrong! I'm mighty sorry that he's got in with bad people."

Jansie's lips moved in silent counting as she twirled a corner of the complicated pattern, but her troubled frown did not lighten. "Oh, maybe he won't get into more trouble," she said but there was no hopefulness in her tone. "He hasn't been home since Mamma died, and the last time Chris saw him, she said he was dressed awfully fine. Maybe she just thought his clothes were fine."

"Could he be making money in the oil fields, Jansie?" Grandma Cockrill asked. "Some of the town boys have gone out there to work."

Jansie shook her head. "No, Ma'am, I'm afraid not," she answered with a sad, dry humor. "Joe never was much of a worker, and they have to put out *some* work for them good wages! They ain't giving them away."

"No, that's right." Grandma Cockrill's eyes were bright upon the other for a long moment. "You're right, Jansie," she agreed quietly.

But the Collins boys had to travel ever shortening distances in order to reach the high wage districts of the oil country. For slowly, strike by strike, wildcat and test well, the field was moving toward Collins. Each exciting new development proved the rich shale closer to the prairie town.

Presently, the town was invaded by booted men with clean hands and fast northern accents. Their slim, clever-looking wives grumbly rented the best houses in town and fixed them up with odd-looking makeshifts that kept the town girls in fascinated conversation. When dark-eyed, Spanish-looking Mrs. Mayes, wife of the head geologist with the Star Oil, put strange-looking batiks in her living-room and was seen publicly going into ecstasies over Granny Witherspoon's old coffee mill, the townspeople smilingly decided that the Yankee woman was crazy. And this decision was not lessened by the fact that John Mayes built his wife a foreign-looking house right in the middle of a grove of scrub-oaks, and didn't cut a tree between the house and the street!

But the cottage in the scrub-oak had a peculiar attraction for the high school girls. They would go by in their middy blouses and dark wool skirts, moving slowly past the little house. To them it looked like something out of a fairy story, with its barn door and rough hewn shingles. They hoped to catch a glimpse of Mrs. Mayes in her bright orange blouse, and each girl had a secret dream of some day being asked in to "tea" or some other equally vague and glamorous occasion.

Isadora Smith and Eileen Parker began calling the family supper, "dinner," much to the disgust of the shirt-sleeved and gallused fathers, and with the uncertain acquiescence of more open-minded mothers. That vague geographical enigma called "the East," meaning just about anything east of the Mississippi river, but particularly New York and Philadelphia, became the synonym for sophistication. Collins, Texas, was growing up!

Jansie always dreaded the ordeal of walking down the long Main Street which was the soul of the town. The pushing crowds, disproportionately heavy because of the impending boom, the noisy traffic, and the occasional sympathetic stare of a passerby, were acutely distressing to the hunchbacked woman.

But now and then, impelled by some need of Chris' she would venture the effort.

"We'll get three yards of print and make you a nice dress for school," she told Chris one sunny Saturday morning in the spring of Chris' Junior year in high school. "Miz Cockrill says she'll help me make it right."

Chris looked up from smoothing the bed which she shared with Jansie in Annie's old room. "Can you spare the money, Jansie?" she asked dubiously. "I don't want you to spend what you can't afford."

"I helped Miz Cockrill with hoeing her garden patch yesterday and she paid me a dollar." Jansie bent over the box in which she kept the rolls of her lace, and came up with four quarters. "I want to get you a dress with it."

"My goodness, Jansie, I think that's wonderful!" Chris' voice was admiring. "But maybe you ought to use it—"

"I'm going down and buy some print for you a dress," Jansie interrupted firmly. "I guess the Ladies' Aid ain't going to give you ever' stitch you wear if *I* can help it!"

She went to the bureau and, opening the drawer, took out her old purse that had been Annie's. She opened it and laid it on the dresser, then carefully rolling the four quarters into a short length of her lace, she tucked the roll into the purse.

"Are you going to take the money all wrapped up in that piece of lace?" Chris asked worriedly. "Won't it look funny?"

"I ain't taking any chances of losing that money," Jansie told her. "That old purse falls open all the time!"

Going down the street with Chris walking, tall and sweet, beside her, wasn't so bad, Jansie thought happily as they drew near Tate's Dry Goods Store. Maybe the fact that she had a dollar in her purse and was planning to spend it, might have something to do with the growing feeling of independence that swelled within her as they paused to look at the display in the store window.

"There, Jansie," Chris pointed to a bolt of soul-lifting blue touched with tiny flowers. "That one is pretty. Let's get that."

Now that the moment was upon her, Jansie's nerve weakened. To go boldly into the cool and elegant depths of the fine-smelling store, and to order a dress length cut off, just

like that, was almost more than she could face. What if she didn't have enough money, after all!

Then, telling herself that it certainly wouldn't hurt to price the material, she straightened her body a little, gulped, "All right," and followed Chris into the store.

The material was priced and proved to be within reach. But when it had been cut off and the moment came to pay, Jansie looked up at the lofty saleswoman and wished fervently that she hadn't rolled the quarters up in that piece of lace. She'll think I'm an ignorant country woman, sure enough, she thought sadly, and wished that she had listened to Chris.

There was nothing to do except to go ahead and open her purse, though, and get out the ball of lace and unroll the quarters. Grimly, Jansie got out her money under the interested and amused eyes of the clerk. To make it worse, another woman was standing nearby, watching as she waited to be served, and Jansie could feel the clerk's knowing glance go over her head to the eyes of the other customer. They're laughing at me, she thought bitterly. She took up the coins and handed them to the clerk, and the sheer length of the lace lay filmy on the counter.

"I'll get the change, Jansie," Chris whispered, "and you go ahead and put away your lace."

Her head drooping with embarrassment, Jansie fumbled on the counter.

But another hand was there before her, a slender, smoothly gloved hand, diffident on the filmy stuff of the lace. "May I see it, please?" asked a voice in the eastern accent so often heard on the streets of Collins these days. "Would you mind if I looked at your lace? It's so beautiful—"

"No, go ahead—" Jansie snapped her purse shut, and without looking at the speaker, turned to look for Chris.

But Chris had gone to the wrapping counter for the bundle and the change, and Jansie had to wait. The gray-gloved hands beside her went on fondling the lengths of lace.

"Isn't it knit lace?" the woman asked.

Jansie forced her glance up, past the knowing simplicity of the smart suit, to quiet blue eyes. "Yes'm, it is," she admitted,

and at something she saw in those eyes, a new confidence grew within her. "I made it myself."

Appreciatively, the woman let the lace lie along her fingers. "I've seen a little of it before," she told Jansie, and there was the understanding of the connoisseur in her tone. "But this is so lovely—"

Chris and the clerk came up, and stood nearby, Chris waiting for Jansie, and the clerk waiting to serve the woman in the gray suit.

"Would you consider selling me this piece?" the woman asked Jansie, "and do you have more like it?"

Bewilderment blotted out the last vestige of embarrassment in Jansie. The woman wanted to buy the lace! Chris and the clerk looked on in equal amazement. There was no telling what these Yankees would want to buy next!

"Why, yes, I'll sell it." Jansie's voice was husky with sheer surprise. "I've got lots more of it at home, as I've been making it for years."

"How much do you want for it?" the woman asked.

Jansie shook her head. "I don't know," she admitted. "I don't have no idea what it's worth."

"Would a dollar a yard be a fair price?" the woman asked.

Wordlessly, Jansie nodded.

"I'll be glad to measure it for you, Mrs. Stephens," the now very obsequious clerk said quickly. "It's so lovely!"

"Thanks, if you will." And there was something in Mrs. Stephens' very courteous tone that put the clerk on the other side of some barrier from the artist, Jansie!

The lace measured two yards.

"And may I bring some of my friends to see your lace?" Mrs. Stephens asked as she handed out two one-dollar bills. "If you'll just tell me where you live—"

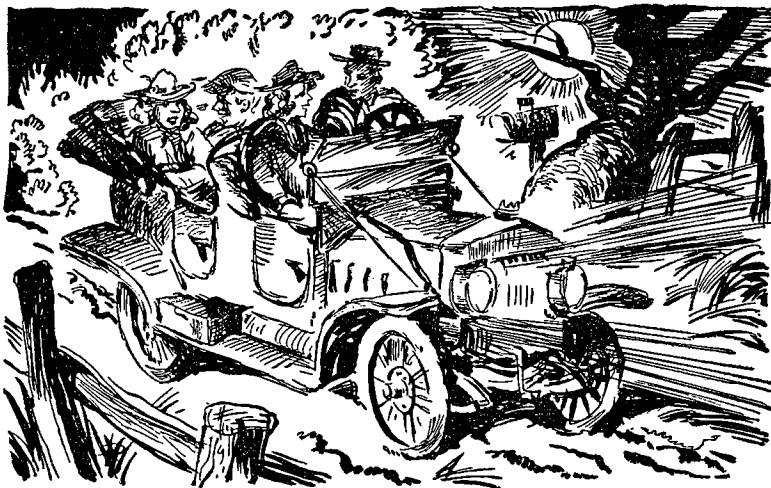
"I live in the shanty at the edge of town on the Thello Road," Jansie said matter-of-factly.

"Jansie, a dollar a yard!" Chris' whisper was eager as they were once more walking in the morning sunlight outside. "Why, there's no telling how much you could make."

But Jansie's mind was not on the money, warming as the thought of it might be. *It didn't matter one bit to her where I lived*, she was thinking wonderingly, *all that mattered to her was the lace!*

And in that moment on the dusty sidewalk of Main Street, a door opened in Jansie's heart. For something had happened in the store. She hadn't been just Jansie Sanders, who was crippled and who lived out on the edge of town in a shanty. It hadn't mattered that she was poor and shabby and that the clerk had been patronizing.

All these things, facts though they were, had faded before one gloriously shining truth. In that moment in the store, when Mrs. Stephens had been studying her lace, Jansie had been the artist accepting the homage of the connoisseur, and both of them had known it!



11

CHRIS was enjoying high school more and more. The nice clothes that the Ladies' Aid helped provide in adequate abundance made a great difference in her outlook on life. The other girls were casually cordial in the classes and hallways of the school, and if their cordiality did not extend itself past school hours, Chris paid scant attention. After all, she had never known parties and hayrides, except for an occasional glimpse through brightly lighted windows, of dressed-up young people around an upright piano, or the lazy laughter that comes through small-town air through summer dusks. So she did not particularly miss them, admittedly, at least.

And now and then, with the sporadic democracy of Christianity, she was carefully invited to a Sunday School social or picnic, and these she enjoyed to the full. And it was on a Sunday School picnic that she met Ernie Peters, the summer she was sixteen.

Jansie hesitated about letting Chris go to the picnic that night. Some vague foreboding, heightened perhaps by the

breathless storm-threat of the summer evening, warned her to keep the girl at home. But Amy Forbes begged, and Chris' hazel-green eyes were wide with pleading, so Jansie reminded herself how very little youthful pleasure the girl really had, and gave in.

Part of the reason for her reluctance was Amy Forbes herself. In spite of the fact that the Forbes, who lived half-way to town from the shanty in a run-down, sprawling barn-of-a-house, were at least one step above the level of the Sanders in the social scale, Jansie distrusted their motivations. The Forbes girls, there were four of them, had too many bright dresses and too many boy friends. Their poverty, for old man Forbes made a very precarious living for his brood of ten, doing odd jobs around town, set far too lightly on blithe shoulders. There was laughter in the big, half-painted house, but Jansie wanted no such laughter for Chris.

But Amy Forbes was about all that Chris Sanders could hope to claim for a friend. You could hardly expect the children of old-timers, like Isadora Smith and Eileen Parker, or even the less knowing newcomers such as Roberta McPherson, whose father ran the big new chain store on Main Street, or Evelyn Cox, whose father was the head of the Star Oil Interests in the town, to hurdle the barrier of the railroad tracks and run around with Chris Sanders. So Chris chummed with Amy Forbes, as much as Jansie would let her.

"You'd do better just to sort of — well — go it alone, Chrisie," Jansie would suggest tentatively. And then she would wince before the hurt in Chris' eager eyes.

"But Jansie, everybody has girl friends, and — and boy friends, too!" Chris would protest tearfully. "I can't spend all my time reading books and studying my lessons. Anyway, Amy's fun."

Jansie's dark brows would draw down in a troubled frown. "I reckon so," she would admit reluctantly. "And I guess you do have to have some fun, but you be in by eleven, you hear?"

Chris would promise blithely and hurry away to the companionship of Amy, Amy of the loose-lipped laughter and the wise eyes.

Perhaps it was a hint from Amy to Ernie's temporary sidekick, Charley Dowens, that gave the boys the incentive to brave the excessive niceness of a Sunday School picnic. Ernie was hard put that summer to alleviate the stifling boredom of a man of seventeen who finds himself exiled from all that makes life interesting.

In fact, his banishment from the sophisticated joys of Pittsburgh to the uncertain pleasures of a summer with his sister, Mrs. Mayes, was due in part to an over-participation in those very joys, a participation that had at last strained the patience of a long-suffering family.

So Ernie went to the picnic, feeling that any amusement a man might find in this bucolic wilderness would be pure gain. He watched boredly as a furtive signal passed between his temporary ally for purposes of hunting, Charley, and Amy. Across the circle of an innocuous game of *clap-in, clap-out*, he watched the pattern develop, and knew that it was just a matter of feigned interest to allay the unworldly watchfulness of the Sunday School chaperon, before Amy would meet Charley out near where Charley's jitney was parked, to be seen no more at the picnic.

But Ernie's jaded palate quickened at the sight of the girl with Amy. At the first sight of the golden-green eyes and the soft curls, the neat summer dress and the clean fingernails, he had decided that the girl was just near Amy in the exigencies of the game. But time passed, and she showed no signs of taking a place near the well-defined group of more popular "nice girls." Ernie could hardly believe his own well-practiced judgment, but eventually the truth was borne in on him with an excitement-quickened certainty, that Chris was with Amy!

And when Amy appeared near Charley's flivver, according to schedule, she had Chris in tow. "Aw, come on, Chris!" Amy's usual goodnatured loudness was muted to a practical whisper. "Come on, the boys just want to take us home! I'm sick of that old picnic!" Amy gave forth with her perpetual giggle.

But Chris, remembering Jansie's hesitancy as to letting her come at all, was reluctant. "Amy, I can't leave the picnic!

I've got to be home by eleven, anyway. You go on and go with the boys if you want to. But I can't. Jansie wouldn't like it a bit."

It was at this point that Ernie took a hand. Chris became aware of a tall figure smiling beside her in the half-darkness. "Well, look who's here!" Ernie leaned down to peer interestedly into her eyes. "The prettiest girl south of the Mason-Dixon line!"

Chris felt a warm glow of pleasure go over her at his words.

"I'm Ernie Peters," announced the tall boy, with deft assurance and a crisp northern accent, "and you are, hmmm, let me guess. You are Chris Sanders."

Chris looked up in surprise. "How'd you know?"

Ernie opened his mouth to continue his line, but discovered to his own surprise that he was answering matter-of-factly, "Amy told me she was going to bring a girl named Chris Sanders."

"Aw, come on, Chris." Amy was already snuggled in the front seat, well braced by Charley's willing arm. "Come on, let's go!"

Chris felt a strong, quick hand take hers, and a laughing voice coaxed. "Aw, come on, Chris — darling." Ernie had learned long ago that no woman seemed to be able to resist his boyish wistfulness. "You wouldn't want me to ride in that old back seat all by myself, now, would you?"

Chris went.

At any time, Ernie was a man of experience and technique, but never before had he performed for a more appreciative audience than tonight. His oldest line was dazzlingly new to the hazel-green eyes and the soft, red mouth that smiled through the dusk.

The dark woods spun past the rattling little car, and the night wind was cool and sweet across the Texas world, but Ernie paid them no heed. He was busy.

"Look, honey." Ernie pushed a tanned arm along the back of the seat and played with soft fingers, "look, where've you been all summer? I've not seen you around, at any of the parties or anything. Where do you live?"

Chris hesitated, but honestly sparred her answer. "I — I live in the smithy out on the Thello road," she told him, watching his face.

But Ernie was too clever to give himself away. So this cute kid lived in that dump! His first impulse of pity quickly passed, and he shifted his plans a little. After all, he was doing the girl a favor to go with her, if that was the kind she was!

Chris sensed a withdrawing in him, and not understanding it, her shyness returned. "I — I guess I'd better go home now," she called to Amy. "Jansie will be worried. It's almost eleven."

"Aw, Chris." Amy raised her head from Charley's shoulder to grumble.

But after a whispered consultation, Charley turned the little car in the direction of the Thello road.

"Do you have to go home now?" Ernie's voice held nothing but interested gentleness. "It's early yet." And one hand crept up to stroke the soft curls.

A heady new excitement stirred in Chris at the touch of his hand. "I — guess I'd better." But her voice held hesitation.

And hearing the reluctance, Ernie tightened his arm about her shoulders.

His interest quickened.

And to Chris the well-practiced line was Romance. It was stardust and moonbeams, and the scent of growing things through the summer darkness. Sensing that Ernie was making headway, Charley eased the little car to a stop by the side of the road to the shanty and he and Amy set about their love-making with all the casual ease of experience.

And Chris scarcely noticed that they had stopped. She was, in that moment, one with all the fair heroines of history, with Elaine and Melisande and Juliet. She was not just a rather shabby young girl parked with a tough youngster under some scrub-oaks on the Texas prairie. She was lost somewhere in the land of books, of dreams, of little-girl happiness, and the dark outline of the shanty in the not-too-far distance was a storied castle on a far, sweet hill.

Presently, Amy and Charley slipped out of the car, and ran into the shadows of the scrub-oaks beside the road. Ernie's hands grew bolder.

And perhaps, if Ernie had not been so absorbed, the sight of the grotesque figure that seemed to materialize beside the car from nowhere, would not have been such a shock. As it was, the strangely hunched back, the wizened face and fiercely burning eyes seemed to belong to some witchlike inhabitant of the Texas woods, put there for the particular harassment of unsuspecting young men from the more sophisticated north!

Jansie had awakened a little earlier from a restless doze, to discover that it was after eleven and that Chris had not come in. Her first sensation had been one of panic, a panic of helplessness. For Chris could stay out all night, and there wouldn't be a thing she could do about it! Paw and Willie slept on, oblivious of all the things that made her anxious. And Jansie knew that if she should go in there and wake Paw and tell him her fears, that he'd just mumble a sleepy, puzzled reassurance of laziness and go right back to sleep.

Going to the window, she looked out at the golden perfection of the night. The earlier storm threat had died away unfulfilled and peace lay over the prairie.

She didn't trust that Amy Forbes, not even as far as she could throw her! Jansie twisted her hands together in an unaccustomed gesture of nervousness and futility, and wandered out of the shanty into the moonlight. That Sunday School picnic couldn't have lasted so late! She walked up and down in front of the smithy, waiting. No use to go back in there and try to sleep.

And all about the shanty, the night lay sweetly fragrant over the world. The moon was a golden censer, pouring out beauty. Somewhere a drowsy bird twittered and the stars hung low, heavy with summer.

It was only when her eyes had become accustomed to the half-light that she became aware of the car parked some distance down the shadowed road. It was not an uncommon sight, for the place was a favorite haunt of parkers. In her

nervousness, Jansie strolled toward it, her slippered feet silent on the soft dirt of the lane.

As she came nearer, she saw two forms slip into the shadowed scrub near the roadside, and her lips twisted in contempt for their meaning. Then she stiffened and reconsidered the figure of the girl. That girl had looked like Amy Forbes!

Thoroughly on the alert now, she slipped toward the parked car, and her going made no sound and gave no warning. Her lips moved but no sound came from them. "If Chris is out there in the scrub with some boy," she was telling the Almighty. "I'll kill somebody with my bare hands, and I'm giving You fair warning!"

As she drew nearer the car, a low murmur of voices told her that the other couple was still sitting in the back seat. She listened to the coaxing sureness of the masculine tones, and her fingers worked slowly. There was no mistaking the persuasiveness in the murmured undertones.

Then Jansie stopped still, every inch of her body quiet for listening, as Chris' laughter came softly through the night. When the laughter had stopped in a muffled blend of sounds, the crippled woman moved forward again, her head sunk a little lower between her shoulders and her scrawny neck tense.

Chris sat curled up on the back seat, and Ernie's arms were about her. Ernie's head was bent close to the brown curls. "You're sweet, honey," he was whispering huskily, over and over. "You're awfully sweet!"

And even as Jansie watched, he bent and kissed the soft red mouth, which came up to meet his, and his arms tightened hungrily.

"Chris!" Jansie's voice held all the agony of her heart. "Chris Sanders!"

And it was then that Ernie looked up to see the apparition standing beside the car.

With a muffled "Awrk!" of surprise, he let go of Chris and scrambled over to his own side of the seat. It was only when the apparition spoke that he realized that it was human. "Chris," Jansie's voice was husky with hurt and rage. "It's past time for you to come in!"

Without a word, Chris crawled out of the car, and stood beside Jansie, her face shamed. "I — I" — she turned pleading eyes back toward the boy.

But he scarcely looked at her. His eyes were on Jansie with an awful fascination.

Jansie leaned into the car and her face was ghastly in the moonlight. "You get out of here," she told him quietly. "You get out of here and don't ever let me catch you hanging around here again! You hear me?"

"Yes!" gulped Ernie, and forgetting all about Charley and Amy, there having been utter silence from the scrub during this interchange, he tumbled out of the flivver — and got!

And even as he departed, Ernie realized with the instinctive clarity of fear, that had the apparition appeared a few minutes later in the proceedings, it would have gone ill, very ill indeed, for Ernie Peters!

Never again would Ernie Peters be able to kiss a girl with quite the same carefree abandon as before!

All the way home, Chris tried to choke back the tears, and Jansie stalked beside her, the wizened face turned away, and seemingly indifferent. The moonlight lay about them in golden mockery, holding forth its own sardonic promise of beauty and its own fulfillment of shadow.

"All right, all right," Jansie said at length, without turning her head. "Go on and cry, Chris! You might as well. I can hear you sniffing."

They had reached the shanty now, and at Jansie's dry-toned remark, Chris sat down on the sagging step and gave way to jerking sobs of frustration and disappointment. "You've ruined everything, Jansie Sanders!" She rubbed her hand across her eyes with a childish gesture. "I never had a single boy friend before in all my life, and now you've gone and run him off!"

Jansie stood, her stooped figure small beside the weathered old step, and peered down at the girl in helpless perplexity. She was silent for so long that Chris was forced to raise her head. "I— I didn't mean to hurt your feelings, Jansie," she

faltered. "I reckon I was just mad." She looked anxiously at the suffering, wizened face.

"I know." Jansie threw out a long hand in a quick gesture and sat down on the step beside the girl. "It ain't that you're mad that bothers me. That's natural. Any girl would be disappointed to have her beau sent home that way." She smiled wryly, then groped for words to express her meanings. "It's just — that — I reckon I'm trying to figure out a way to explain things to you."

The hazel-green eyes darkened. "I — I — guess I do understand about things, Jansie." Chris' voice was an embarrassed mumble. "The other girls, you know—"

Jansie shrugged impatiently. "I ain't talking about how babies come, and all that Chris," she said drily. "You're sixteen years old and you been more or less around livestock all your life. I reckon anybody with any sense would see how things is — that way! And I reckon them same girls has seen to it that you know about your folks?"

Chris nodded, her head drooping in the golden wash of light. "Yes, some."

Jansie got to her feet and her movements were weary. "Come on in with me, Chrissie," she ordered quietly. "Come on; I want to show you something."

Wonderingly, Chris followed the crippled figure into the house and into the bedroom. There Jansie lit the kerosene lamp and set it on the rickety bureau, and turning to Chris, she said, her voice grim. "Look at me, Chris."

And for the first time in her life, Chris really looked at Jansie, at the terrible, small, hunched figure, at the wizened face and the dark hair, at the long hands and burning eyes.

"But what—" she began.

But taking hold of Chris' shoulders, Jansie turned her to face the mirror. "Now, look at yourself," she ordered the girl.

Chris gazed for a long moment at the reflection of her own deepening beauty. "Yes." She looked back at the crippled woman. "I know how I look. But what are you talking about, Jansie?" She turned and leaned back, with both hands be-

hind her on the bureau, and her eyes were merely questioning. "I don't know what you mean."

Jansie shuffled over to the bed and sat down. "It's this way," she began, and her words were groping for some expression for this thing she was trying to say. "God makes people the way they are, Chris. He made me," one long hand swept in a gesture down her crippled body, "this way! And there ain't a thing on this green earth that I can do about it! I'm still me, and inside, I— well no matter how I feel inside, I'm still this way, me, outside, and I got to live by that, and," again the hand swept its gesture, almost of contempt, "and what *it* gets me!"

Chris made no answer, but her eyes were on Jansie, and she was listening.

"And you." Jansie looked up at the tall, young sweetness of the body of the girl, "you're beautiful, Chris. Just plain beautiful!"

Chris stole an involuntary glance over her shoulder, then flushed as she met her own eyes in the mirror.

"But you," Jansie's voice deepened with earnestness, "have to live with the way your folks was, and the kind of a family you've had all your life. You've got no such body as mine to put up with, Chris, but you are going to have to face things the way they are for you, just the same way I've had to face 'em." She paused, and in the silence about them R. P.'s snores rose and fell in the quiet house, and outside, on the prairie, a sleepy bird complained at the moon. "It's kind of like living in houses, each one of us in a different kind. We didn't have no choice about those houses, and the kind of lives we was born into, either! But Chris," and her voice was husky with feeling, and the dark eyes were deep upon the girl, "even if we wasn't born to have the things about us the way we want them, we don't have to let the outside of us make the inside all bitter and ugly and twisted! We can be just as straight and as beautiful and clean as we want to be — inside!"

Chris made a small movement and her young face was thoughtful and a little sad.

After a long moment, Jansie went on. "No," she said slowly, as if talking to herself, "your house ain't ugly like mine, Chris. I guess," she smiled wryly, "that you might say that folks has left your backyard all messy with *their* trash. And as long as you stay where folks know who you are and where you come from, some men will look at that trashy backyard behind the pretty house and decide that the inside of the house is full of sneaking nastiness and trash! Some men is just made that way, Chris, and," she sighed with a kind of weariness of the very fact of life, "you'll just have to remember it, Chrissie, and live with it!"

"It's not fair, though." Chris' voice was tight with tears. "I'm just like any other girl, Jansie. I want things nice, and—and right, too!"

Jansie's answering smile was strangely gentle. "I know," she answered softly. "*I ought to know*, Chris!"

And for a moment, for the first time in her young life, Chris came out of the terrible self-absorption of youth to understand another's suffering. "Oh, Jansie!" She ran across the space between them and flung herself into the crippled woman's arms. "I love you so! And I will be good, just like you want me to be, I promise! And I'll study hard and — and —"

Jansie hugged the girl, then, pushing her away, she blew her nose with a brisk snort. "Never mind, Chris." She grinned a little. "Don't commit yourself too much. You might bite off more than you can chew!"



12

It isn't that I'm trying to run your business, Jansie," Miss Templeton's gray eyes were anxious on the crippled woman, "but, somehow, someway, a girl as brilliant as Chris should manage to go to college!"

She paused and in the silence that followed her words, they could hear the desultory clang of R. P.'s hammer coming from the shop. Late spring sunshine shone bright through the small, clean window panes of Jansie's kitchen. Outside, the spring-greening prairie pressed close to the shanty.

Jansie was silent for so long that Miss Templeton moved uneasily and spoke again, her tone apologetic. "I — I suppose that you've been counting on Chris' helping out here with your family when she finishes high school," the English teacher suggested. "I know that you *have* sacrificed a great deal to keep her in school this long, but —"

Jansie stopped her with a small gesture of negation. "It ain't that, Miss Templeton," she said slowly. "I ain't so much

counting on Chrissie to help us unless she just wants to, but well—" she hesitated and the teacher was surprised to see a slow flush rise up in the dark, wizened face, "It's just that I hadn't never thought none about college! I reckon it just never come into my mind! Does Chrissie want to go?"

Miss Templeton nodded eagerly. "I'm sure she does," she answered quickly, "I talked to her about it as soon as I realized that she would be entitled to several scholarships because of her being valedictorian of her class. You see," she explained, "several colleges here in the state give such honorary scholarships for high scholastic ratings. And I'm sure such a brilliant girl as Chris has proved herself to be, could get work to help with her clothes and board." She leaned forward, her gloved fingers tight on her purse and her gray eyes compelling on Jansie's. "If she could just manage one year, Jansie, then she could get a temporary certificate and teach in a country school. After that," she went on earnestly, "she could go to school summers, and eventually get her degree. Teachers are in demand since the war, and salaries, even in the country districts, are better than they've been."

"I see—" Jansie's voice was thoughtful, but her dark eyes were bright upon those of the teacher. "And you think Chrissie could be a teacher?"

"Of course she could!" Miss Templeton's voice deepened in response to the joy of the crippled woman. "Chris can be anything, Jansie! She's beautiful and sweet and has a fine mind—" Then, sensing that she had accomplished the purpose of her errand, she arose. "I must be going," she said gently. "I know this is a big decision for you, Jansie, and may mean a sacrifice —"

Jansie's hunched frame shuffled beside the visitor toward the door at the top of the smithy steps. She stood for a moment beside Miss Templeton, her eyes looking down into the dimness of the smithy, and her dark face was inscrutable.

"You think it over," Miss Templeton said again, holding out a courteous hand. "If it can be managed —"

Jansie touched the smoothly gloved hand of the teacher with long, shy fingers. "I don't have to think it over, Miss Templeton," she answered, and her head was turned away, toward the shop, and her voice came muffled. "I don't have to think it over!" The dark eyes came around to look up into the eyes of the teacher. "If Chrissie can be something like that, she's going!"

And as the English teacher walked down the steps, and through the smithy, out into the slanting light of the late afternoon sun, a deep certainty was strong within her, that Chris would go to college. And there was within her, too, a wondering at the inexorable determination that she had seen in the passionate dark eyes.

After the teacher had gone, Jansie sat down in Annie's old rocking chair, and tried to control her trembling. Chris going to college! It was almost too much to hope.

After a while, unable to stay in the shanty with the swelling magnificence of her thoughts, she took up her faded sun-bonnet from the nail behind the door, and went down the smithy steps.

R. P., who had seemed oblivious to the arrival and departure of the teacher, looked up from his work. He did very little shop work now, even less than he ever had before, but a few small jobs for the poorer tenant farmers came his way now and then. And as she stood looking at him now, out of her new sense of perception caused by her joy, Jansie saw that he was getting the crumbly look of a very old man.

"Where you going, Jansie?" he asked, and his hammer stilled on the anvil as he asked the question. "Where you going before supper this way?"

Jansie paused. "Just walking," she told him. "I'll be back before Chrissie comes in. She's practicing for the graduation exercises."

R. P. turned back to his anvil, but he did not raise the hammer. There was something on his mind. "She'll be all done with schooling pretty soon now, won't she?" he asked, but he did not look at Jansie.

Jansie stood, waiting, but she made no answer.

R. P. did not seem to notice her silence, but went on talking, half to himself, and half to her. "I shore miss your maw—" he told her.

Still Jansie did not answer, but her dark eyes watched him.

"We ain't been to Cowtown nor nowheres, since—" he went on, and he was watching her from the corners of his eyes, "since your—"

"No, and we ain't going no more, neither." Jansie's voice broke in coldly. "I ain't going on no more of them trips."

Now R. P. turned full toward her, his faded eyes rheumy and plaintive. "I ain't strong," he whined, "and me and your mamma always come home from them trips with a nice little nest egg—"

The crippled woman stood looking at him, and her dark face was a mask of bitter contempt. "We ain't never going again," she said flatly. "I decided that five years ago when we went the last time. I've told you ever since, we ain't going on no more of them begging trips!"

And with the final announcement, she turned away, and without another glance at the old man, she shuffled out of the shop toward the pathway to the knoll.

And as she went, the thought of the conversation with R. P. died away in her like the intermittent flicker of summer lightning. Word by word, she reviewed the talk with Miss Templeton, and the exultation of that conversation now deepened to a rushing torrent within her.

Chris was going to college!

Straight up the worn pathway to the knoll she went. It was the spot to which her high moments and her low were taken to be reviewed. And never before had she known such a swelling sense of triumph as she now held within her crippled body. This, all of it, the well-used knoll, the misty look of the Blue Mountains at the edge of the horizon, the late sunlight slanting across the varied greens of the spring-touched prairie, they were hers and hers alone.

In the distance, the figure of a man swung along, walking toward the knoll, and Jansie vaguely resented his existence. But he soon disappeared from sight in the contours of the

ground that lay between, and she forgot him in her reaching sense of joy.

Nothing seemed impossible in that moment. Tomorrow was already conquered.

Jansie took off her sunbonnet and turned her face to the gold and pink-washed sky. "Thank You," she muttered, "I'm appreciating this here chance for Chris, and," she swallowed in her earnestness, "I'll try to make it up to You some day!" And when she had finished her prayer, she stood there, immobile on the knoll, facing the reaches of the prairie.

It was so that the young man came upon her. At the sight of the still, strange figure on the raised bit of ground, he stood for a moment, unseen, looking at her. Then, turning softly, he went back a little on the way he had come, and came again more loudly, blundering over the sage and last year's dry grass, and came noisily toward the crippled woman.

At the sound of his coming, Jansie turned, her dark face shutting itself before a sweep of irritation. But she stood, waiting for the newcomer to look up from his absorbed efforts to make progress. And as she waited, she braced herself for the look of repelled pity that she had come to expect.

But when the young man had gained the semi-clearing of the knoll, he raised his eyes to the woman, and there was on his quiet face nothing but a friendliness and a wry amusement at his own ineptitude.

Surprise and gratitude went through Jansie. He hadn't even noticed her hump!

"Good evening, Ma'am," and his voice was clear across the open space of earth and sky, "could you, by any chance, show me the path to town?"

Jansie smiled. "It's right there." She pointed to where the pathway led away from the knoll on the other side. "That there path goes to the road."

With chagrined seriousness the man walked over and looked down at the path. "So there it is!" he said in a tone of disgust. "Now, if it'll just stay there until I'm ready to use it, I'll be borrowing your hillock for a little breathing spell."

Jansie chuckled drily. "That path has been there for years to my certain knowledge," she assured him, and some hidden corner of laughter within her lighted to his fooling. "Won't you have a chair?" she asked and pointed to a large clump of buffalo grass at the edge of the clearing.

The young man chuckled at her response, and looked about him with appreciative eyes. "This is a pretty place," he told her. "I've been walking around on the prairie all afternoon and I've enjoyed it very much. I especially like," he pointed to the horizon, "those long, low, blue-looking hills out there."

Jansie nodded. "Yes, Mamma always called them the Blue Mountains." Then she added, "Mamma was a great one to make things romantic!"

The young man nodded as if this were very logical. "Yes," he said judicially, "I can see that the name fits them." Then he thrust his hands in his pockets and stood, looking for a long moment at that distant line of blue. "'The mountains shall bring peace to the people,'" he said softly, more to himself than to his listener. "'And the little hills, by righteousness'".

At the sound of the strangely majestic words in his clear, quiet voice, Jansie's heart lifted in an involuntary thrill. "I reckon them hills is just mesquites and sage and dusty grass when you get to them," she commented, as if in answer to her own unexpected response of the heart. "I reckon they ain't so romantic when you get there."

The young man laughed a little, then sobered. "But they're beautiful," he told her, and going to the clump of buffalo grass, he settled his long frame and gestured to a place nearby. "Now, if my hostess will just sit down and entertain me, we'll get along with the amenities," he told her solemnly.

Somewhat doubtfully, Jansie eased to a seat on the indicated grassy spot. She waited, her dark face sardonic.

But the young man seemed serenely in command of the situation. "My name is Charles Robertson," he told her without preliminary. "I'm here in Collins to supply for Doctor McLean while he is in Europe."

"You're a preacher?" Jansie asked in surprise.

Charles Robertson's brown eyes smiled across at her. "Well, kind of," he admitted. "I am studying in the seminary at Fort Worth to be a missionary to China."

Jansie felt impelled to answer such frankness with revelations equally frank. "My name," she told him in a hesitant voice, "is Jansie Sanders. *I live*," she smiled wryly, "down there in that there shanty. I've lived there all my life."

The man smiled at her. "And your family?" he asked in an interested voice.

"Well, there's Mr. Sanders, he's my stepfather, and Chris and Joe and Willie," Jansie told him, then she added proudly, "Chris is graduating from high school this week."

"Fine!" Charles Robertson clasped strong brown hands about his knees and leaned back to listen. "I assume that Chris is your sister?"

Jansie shook her head. "No," she said slowly, "we ain't really sisters. You see, Chrissie's paw gave her to me before he went away. We heard later that he had died of consumption out west." Then, almost involuntarily, she found herself telling him all about Chris' coming, and then about Annie's death and Joe's weaknesses.

The sun grew big with extinction and presently, only the afterglow held the sky, but Jansie, her gaze held by the strong clasp of those brown hands, talked on. And for the first time in her life, under the gently interested eyes and quiet questions of her listener, she forgot all about her hunched back. She was just a woman, talking out of some strange, hitherto untouched depths of herself to an interested man.

But at last she broke off with an embarrassed laugh of remembrance. "Oh my!" She picked up the long neglected sunbonnet and hastily scrambled to her feet. "Here I sit, taking up your time, Mr. Robertson, and telling you all this stuff about me and mine! And it's almost dark!"

Charles Robertson threw down the twig with which he had been stirring at the roots of the grass about him. "It's been a pleasure to have your confidence, Miss Jansie." He stood up, and stood smiling at her through the early dusk.

"And now, if you'll let me, I'll see to it that you get safely home."

Jansie nodded curtly, and led the way down the pathway from the knoll. There was suddenly within her only the consciousness of her deformity and the desperate wish to cover the little distance to the shanty without awkwardness.

As if he sensed her change of mood and the troubled uncertainty of her thoughts, the man remarked, "Do you know, I've really enjoyed hearing about your family. You see," his voice was quiet at her shoulder as he stepped a bit behind her in the path, "I have no family at all."

Taken out of her self-absorption by surprised pity, Jansie looked back at him. "Well, that is too bad," she said simply, then smiled wryly, "I reckon about any family is better than none at all! Who raised you up?"

Sadness deepened in the man's voice as he answered, "My father and mother have both died just this year. I was their only child, and I have no very near relatives, except a few cousins or so." He smiled and went on, "But I had the best parents any man ever had! Dad was a cotton farmer, and we didn't have much, but we were happy." Then he added, "I was thinking about them this afternoon, as I walked the prairie."

"I see." Jansie's tone was thoughtful. "I reckon you had to work, living on the farm that way?"

"Well," the man smiled, "It isn't hard on a boy to work! And it got me ready for these years of preparation for my life's job. It's been slow, going to school and trying to make a living, and I'm already thirty years old."

"Well, you don't look it," Jansie smiled back through the dusk.

Charles Robertson grinned at her. "Thanks," he said drily.

And suddenly, as she walked ahead of the tall young man, there in the soft twilight of the Texas prairie, the crippled woman knew the most exultant sense of happiness and well-being. Startled, she looked about her for some cause, but there were only the familiar reaches of the prairie. Yet, even they were hers with a quickened new realization of the

senses. Through the clear, pale blue of the air, she could hear the distant sound of a cowbell. And somewhere nearby, in the scrub, a sleepy bird chirped out his content with the world of spring. Everywhere about them, as they walked, spread the rich scents of quickening life. High overhead, in the deepening sky of evening, a thin sliver of moon hung palely yellow.

Jansie groped for words in her mind to encompass this sudden joy, but all she could think of were some long forgotten lines from one of Annie's read-aloud old love novels, " 'If I'm never to have anything else' Annabella lifted a proud face to the tender visage of her lover, 'If there is never to be any other joy for me in this vale of tears, I've had this, my darling, I've had this!'"

It was silly, Jansie remembered the high-flown words with a wry new understanding, *But I reckon she did have that!*

And I've had this, her thoughts went on with inevitable sureness to their own conclusion.

Chris was waiting for them as they came up to the wide-open doors of the smithy. Jansie remembered, with a pang of conscience, that she had been supposed to shorten the hem of Chris' homemade white graduation dress before the girl went back to spend the evening helping the other seniors decorate the high school auditorium. And here she had dawdled around up there on the knoll, talking about herself so long that she was too late to do it! She quickened her steps toward the figure in the glowing doorway.

As Chris stood leaning against one side of the wide door, her hands behind her, the firelight from the forge touched the outline of her figure with loving fingers. Hearing the sound of their steps, she had turned her head to peer through the semi-darkness toward them. The light fell on the heart-breaking sweetness of the line of her cheek and the soft fall of curls at her neck.

And in that moment, as clearly as if she were actually gazing from the eyes of the man behind her, Jansie saw Chris' beauty as he saw it.

She's so beautiful! she thought with a sudden hopelessness that pressed against her like a heavy hand. *She's so beautiful and I'm a crippled old fool!*

But the moment passed, and Chris hurried toward them through the shadows, just a worried girl in a homemade white dress. "Jansie!" Her voice was cross. "Where on earth have you been? I ate hours ago and put on my dress so you could fix the hem, and then you didn't come — oh!" she broke off in surprise at the sight of Jansie's companion.

Jansie's voice was quiet. "I'm sorry I was late, Chris. This is Mr. Robertson, the new preacher."

Chris smiled and held out a slender hand. "I didn't know Jansie had company," she apologized. "I wouldn't have been so grouchy."

He laughed aloud as if she had said something especially witty, and took the hand with quick fingers. "I'm hardly company," he answered, and to Jansie's over-perception, there was a new lilt in his voice. "Miss Jansie and I got to telling the stories of our lives and the time got away from us."

Chris smiled at them both with all the unconscious generosity of the truly beautiful woman, and led the way to the smithy door. "I'm almost late, Jansie," she explained, "and I have to get out of this dress and get on to the school. Do you suppose you could fix the hem in the morning?"

"Yes —" Jansie began, but before she could finish speaking, Charles Robertson interrupted eagerly, and his eyes were on Chris as he spoke. "I'm going right back to town," he told her, "so perhaps I could take you to the school, Miss Sanders."

And it was so, when presently they two moved lightly away from her down the pathway toward town, that Jansie stood looking after the tall, sure figure with somber eyes. "He's too old for her," she muttered, but even as she spoke, she knew that it wasn't true, that such perfect beings lived on the same plane, basked in the same warming favor of a strangely partial fate. She watched them turn into the lane, laughing and sure of foot, and disappear into the enfolding evening. "Not that I've any right to talk," she muttered grimly to herself. "He's younger than *I* am!" And for an instant,

standing there in the wide smithy doorway, she was queerly comforted by the matter-of-fact illusion that only the difference of age lay between them.

"Jansie!" Willie's whining voice came to her from the top of the steps to the lean-to. "Jansie, I'm hungry. Ain't we got no supper?" With the intuition of his elemental nature Willie sensed something out of the ordinary, some troubling emotion in the quiet figure of the crippled woman.

"Shut up, Willie," Jansie snapped in an absent-minded voice. "Can't you give me time to do nothing?"

Reassured, Willie went back into the kitchen to wait for the supper that he knew would be forthcoming.

R. P. was still sullen from the afternoon's disagreement, but Jansie served him and Willie with detached attention. When the food was before them, she moved away toward the bedroom door.

"Ain't you going to eat nothing, Jansie?" R. P. asked plaintively, as if her not eating were a further effort to thwart his own wishes. "Ain't you going to eat no supper?"

"I ain't hungry." Jansie's voice was indifferent.

Goaded by her tone to new efforts to gain her attention, R. P. announced abruptly, "Joe's here in town!"

It worked.

Jansie stopped halfway to the bedroom door, and stood, very still. "Where is he?" she asked, without turning her head. "Where is Joe, Paw?"

Willie chuckled slyly over his greasy mastication. "I seen him, too!" he said with his mouth full. "I seen him hiding out in Overfield's woods!"

Jansie's dark eyes came around to fix upon the simple-minded boy. "What's he hiding from?" she demanded.

R. P. looked at her and clicked his tongue with a deprecating sound. "Now, now, Jansie," he said placatingly, "don't you go getting all wrought up! Joe ain't done nothing! He just don't want everybody here in town knowing he's here, that's all! That's his business. Joe says," and he drew a knowing sidewise look at the crippled woman, "Joe says that there's a girl here in town he don't wanta see—"

Jansie snorted. "Humph! Joe ain't got no girl here in town. More likely it's—"

"More likely what?" asked a drawling voice from the top of the smithy steps.

Jansie looked around to find Joe himself standing there, his light-blue eyes hard with laughter, his clothes dusty and worn looking in spite of their lingering air of jaunty expensiveness. "More likely what, Jansie?" he asked again, coolly. "What-a you figure I been doing?"

Jansie glared at him. "I don't know what you been doing, Joe Sanders," she answered coldly. "But I'll bet it ain't been working! What're you home for, anyway?"

"I just wanted to see my folks," Joe assured her, but his opaque eyes belied his words. "After all—" he looked about the kitchen, "Where's Chrissie?" he demanded.

Troubled fear flew across Jansie's eyes. "She's practicing to graduate, Joe," and her voice was almost pleading. "Don't you go ruining things for her now! Let her have her nice time."

And Joe's thin freckled face was unaccustomedly sober as he answered. "I ain't going to bother her, Jansie. Honest, I ain't."

There was an embarrassed silence among the four in the little room.

Joe broke it by clearing his throat noisily. "Well, I guess maybe I'd better tell you why I did come," he said, and drew up a chair to the kitchen table, pushed aside a plate and leaned his elbows on the scrubbed wood. "Sit down, Jansie."

Willie grunted and drew his plate out of Joe's way, and went on chewing. Jansie eased herself to a chair near the stove, and her dark eyes were wary.

"Listen Paw," Joe began without preliminary, "you leased the place yet?"

R. P. looked important. "No, I was just talking the other day to old man Hardeman, and he said the Western Oil and Gas Company'd asked him—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know." Joe's interruption was impatient. "But what I want to know, Paw, is has any oil company talked to you about a lease?"

With a sidelong glance at Jansie, R. P. answered cautiously, "Well, I ain't saying, Joe,—"

With an ominous quietness in her wizened face, Jansie stood up and shuffled across to stand in front of the old man, "You have leased the place, Paw!" she stated, rather than asked. "I can tell by the way you're a-hedging around. How much did you get for it?"

"Well, now—" R. P. refused to meet her eyes.

"When?" demanded Jansie, relentlessly. "When did you lease it?"

"Well, now—Saturday." R. P. squirmed as if the words were being literally wrung from his reluctant body. "Them fellers come by here and—"

Joe looked on, grinning.

"Where's that money?" demanded Jansie, coldly. "What have you done with that money?"

R. P. stubbornly refused to open his mouth, but his eyes would not meet the angry dark ones bending above him.

"You got it on you," Jansie decided grimly. "You give it to me!"

Alarm flew across R. P.'s face and he drew back from her, almost whimpering.

Willie picked up his plate and moved to the stove with it, out of range of the quarrel. Joe looked on and said nothing, but his eyes were quick with interest and amusement.

Jansie stood very still above the old man, one long hand held out in a commanding gesture.

"I—I been planning to buy me a few little things I want," R. P. said plaintively. "All my life I ain't had the things I've wanted and now—"

Contempt flew across Jansie's face, but she refused to make an answer. And presently, like a chastened child, R. P. drew out a small roll of bills.

Jansie took the money, and, under the interested gaze of her small audience, carefully counted it. "Ten, fifteen, twenty,

forty, sixty, eighty, ninety, ninety-five, ninety-six, ninety-seven, ninety-eight, ninety-nine, ninety-nine fifty, ninety-nine seven-five, a hundred." She turned a quick sharp glance on the old man. "Is this here all you got, Paw?" she asked.

R.P. nodded, his face sullen. "Yes, that's all. Ten dollars a acre."

Carefully, Jansie divided the money into five piles on the table. Then, turning to R. P., she pointed to the piles. "Now, there they are, all even," she told him. "Twenty dollars for you, Paw." She handed him the first small pile. "Twenty for Joe." Joe took his share with a glance of sardonic admiration for his half-sister. "Twenty for Willie." She picked up the silver quarter and handed it to the half-wit boy and added the rest of his money to her own pile. "Here, Willie, you can spend this on anything you want and I'll keep the rest of it for you." Willie took the quarter with a happy smile, and sat turning it in his hands, admiring its shine, and perfectly content. "And I," Jansie folded the rest of the bills between her long fingers, "I'll keep my share and Chrissie's and Willie's."

And then, as the three men sat looking at her, she added, "Willie's part can go to get him a new coat for cold weather, but Chrissie's and mine," she finished proudly, "is going to help send Chrissie to college next winter!"

"College!" Joe looked completely dumbfounded. "Jansie, have you gone crazy? How could Chris go to college?"

Jansie faced him. "There ain't no reason why a girl like Chris shouldn't go to college!" she said defiantly. "She's as smart as they come, and this is a free country, I reckon!"

"School, school, school," R. P. grumbled discontentedly. "All I ever hear is school! Where's the money coming from, I'd like to know."

Jansie held her small, bent body as straight and as tall as she could. "It'll come," she announced grimly. "Chrissie can work and I make a little with my lace." And then, looking down at the small, tight roll in her hands, she added in a wondering tone, "Seems to me, it's already started coming!"

"Well!" Joe stood up, and his dusty boots were loud on the bare floor, "I guess I'll be going, now that I've got mine." He grinned across at Jansie. "Do you know, Jansie, I believe Sheb Jackson could take lessons from you."

Jansie glared at him. "And what do you mean by that, Joe Sanders?" she demanded.

Joe's light eyes were amused. "And you don't even take a chance of the pen, either!" he added, coolly.

For an instant, anger blazed in Jansie's dark eyes, then, as the significance of his words got through to her, her face sobered.

She followed him to the door and down the smithy steps. "Joe," she called softly, as his tall frame was silhouetted against the night sky in the smithy doorway, "Joe, wait a minute—"

Joe paused and waited for her to come up with him. "Well," he looked down at her, "what is it?"

"Joe—" Jansie's voice was hesitant and troubled, "I'm worried about you! I don't know what it is you're a-doing, but if it's with Sheb Jackson, it's bound to be wrong and — dangerous!"

"Is that all you have to say?" Joe asked. "If it is, I'll be getting on." He turned away.

"No wait." One long hand went out to tug gently at his sleeve. "Look, Joe, I'm afraid I— I haven't done right by you — all these years! I've been so busy trying to get Chrissie raised right that I— I guess I didn't do the right part by you."

Joe smiled down through the dusk. "You mean, you didn't drag me down to get religion like you did Chrissie?" His voice was more gentle than his words. "It wouldn't have done any good. You can let your mind rest about that. You didn't get a chance at me soon enough!"

"No, that's not right," Jansie refused to be absolved so easily. "I knew, down inside me somewheres, that you was going wrong, Joey! But—" and her voice came quietly troubled through the dimness, "But I had such a long row to hoe, myself. I guess I just didn't worry about your life—"

Gently, Joe pried the worried fingers from his arm. "That's all right, Jansie," he said awkwardly. "You've done about the best you could. I'm just no good and never have been," and there was a perverted pride in his voice. "You've done a mighty good job on Chrissie. And you keep right on doing it, too, here—" and with a quick, dramatic gesture, he dug out the twenty that was his share of the lease money, "go on and send the kid to college! Maybe somebody in this bunch'll amount to something, after all—"

Jansie took the money with reluctant fingers. "But you'll be needing this," she said tentatively. "I got the idea that you was pretty well strapped, Joe—"

Joe laughed and the laugh was not pleasant. "I'll get along," he told her jauntily. "I always have! You keep the money to send the kid to school!"

He cocked his shabby hat and turned away again, his shoulders audacious.

But he turned back. "Jansie." She could feel his strange eyes upon her.

"What is it, Joe?" she asked.

"I— I don't know hardly how to say it," Joe's voice was low, "but — I do know you're right about — well — everything, Jansie." There was nothing defiant in the fumbling words. "And — if ever you should ever want to pray for me, sometimes, when you got nothing more important to do, why—" he gave an embarrassed laugh, "well, just let yourself go! I reckon I'll appreciate it, and — need it!"

And with no other backward glance, he hurried away through the darkness.

After he had gone, Jansie stood for a long time there in the doorway, the money in her hand, staring out into the night. At last, as if the burden of her own thoughts were almost too heavy to be borne, she leaned against the side of the smithy door and whispered, "Oh Lord, I don't reckon it'll do much good to pray for Joe, now. It looks to me as if he's just about out of Your reach, too. But I reckon maybe I'd better be praying for myself! Forgive me—"



13

JANSIE awoke at dawn on the morning that Chris was to be graduated. She lay beside Chris, listening to the sounds of daybreak, and trying to sort out the strange swirl of emotions that pulled at her thoughts. There was the triumph at the very dream of sending Chris to college, and the pleasant sense of accomplishment that went with the memory of the lease money so carefully wound in the rolls of lace in the box under the bed. There was distress at the thought of Joe, and a shy new delight in the memory of her conversation with the preacher. And over all the others, lay a new emotion born of the day and its expectations. Jansie dreaded the day with a consuming reluctance!

On her own side of the bed, Chris still slept, her face turned away and her soft curls tumbled against the pillow. Jansie looked with satisfaction at the clean starchiness of the pillowcase. *She's been raised up in a clean home, anyway*, the crippled woman reassured herself. *She ain't been brought up in no filthy ways!*

She ran long fingers over the rough whiteness of the sheet over her own body and Chris' and looked about the little bedroom that had been Annie's. Through the years since it had been her own, it had taken on a different look. Inexpertly applied paint brightened the rickety furniture, and a well-ironed curtain hung across the corner of the room that served as a closet. *I reckon we ain't as trashy as some!* Jansie struggled to build her ego up to the effort of rising. *Things is clean around here, anyway.*

As if in answer to the strength of her thoughts, Chris turned over and, facing the crippled woman, opened her eyes. "Hi, Jansie," she said with the instant brightness of the awakening young. Then, remembering, she added, "Oh boy! Is this a big day for me!"

"You know your speech?" Jansie demanded with a proud sternness. But her own heart lurched with a sudden sick panic.

Chris giggled happily. "Of course I do," she answered indignantly. "Do you think the valedictorian wouldn't know her speech? 'Fellow students, kind friends of our town, and beloved teachers—'" She sat up in bed, and, incongruous in her cotton nightgown, drew a face of solemn oratory, "'We are assembled here on this vee-ry important occasion of graduation—'"

Jansie looked at the girl and frowned with disapproval. "Look-a here, Chrissie," she said uncertainly, "you ain't acting right! It is important."

Chris giggled again and, climbing out of bed, ran to the window. "I'll say it's important!" she agreed fervently. Leaning out the window, she peered up at the morning sky, then drew a long sigh of relief. "Whew! Thank goodness it's a pretty day!"

"Chris," Jansie forgot her misery at the prospect of the day in delight at bringing a surprise. "Chrissie, you want to go to college?"

All the foolishness left Chris, and she came over, her face quiet, to sit down on the foot of the bed. "Don't tease me, Jansie," she said in a reproachful voice. "There isn't a chance

of my going to college and you know it! I've already decided to ask Mr. Byrd for a job in the dime store next fall." She drew her full nightgown over her drawn-up knees and sat there on the bed, huddled childishly, her eyes thoughtful.

"Oh, I don't know about that!" Jansie looked away to hide the indecent excitement that she knew must be showing in her own eyes. "I was talking to Miss Templeton yesterday, and being as how you're getting a scholarship—"

"Yes, but that's just for the tuition," Chris reminded her. "There'd still be room and board and books and clothes—" she broke off, "It's just plain impossible, Jansie!"

"Hand me that box of lace there under the bed," Jansie ordered.

With her eyes wonderingly upon the crippled woman, Chris untucked her long legs, and climbing down, pulled out the box.

Jansie leaned over and, taking out a thick roll of the lace, unwound the filmy length. Greenbacks and coins rolled out on the bed.

Chris picked up the money. "What—" her voice was puzzled as she counted it. "Where on earth did you get seventy-nine dollars, Jansie?"

Reaching over, Jansie took some of the money. "Nineteen dollars and seventy-five cents of it is Willie's," she admitted. "But the rest is for your schooling, Chrissie."

"But—" Chris' face was suddenly troubled. "Where'd you get it, Jansie?"

"Paw sold a oil lease on the place," Jansie explained, "and this here is your share, and mine and —Joe's — What'd you make outa that dime store job if you could get it until fall, Chrissie?"

"Four dollars a week and I can save every dime of it! Oh, Jansie," Chris' eyes widened with the magnificence of her inner vision, "do you suppose I could—"

Jansie's face was solemn as she nodded. "We're a-going to try!" she assured the girl.

But her misery at the prospect of the day, pushed aside for the moment by the excitement of planning, came back with

a rush when Chris scrambled out of bed. "Oh my! I think I'm going to just die with happiness, Jansie." She went to the corner and peered beneath the closeting curtain. "I have the nicest new dress and I'm valedictorian and," she squeezed the closet curtain in her ecstasy, "and now, I'm going to get to go to college!" She paused, still looking, and her voice dropped to the matter-of-fact. "But what're you going to wear tonight, Jansie?"

There it was! Jansie sat, miserable beneath the inexorable weight of facts. What difference did it make what she wore, anyway? For the finest dress that was ever made wouldn't hide the fact that she was still just little old, crippled Jansie Sanders!

She refused to meet Chris' eyes. "I reckon I just ain't going to be able to go tonight, Chrissie," she said briskly.

Chris stopped in mid-air, so to speak, with the closet curtain still clutched against her. "Jansie!" she wailed. "Not going to hear me make my speech!"

"Now look-a here, Chrissie," Jansie's tone was matter-of-fact, "don't you go and throw no fit about it! I ain't— fixed up to go to no fine doings at the school. You ought to know that! Me and my old print dresses!"

"Wear your church dress then," Chris said practically. "It doesn't look so bad!" She came over to sit on the foot of the bed. "If you don't go to hear me, Jansie Sanders, I won't make my speech!" she finished firmly.

Jansie looked miserable. "Church dress or no church dress," she admitted, "I can't face them crowds, honey."

Chris looked thoughtful. "Do you know, Jansie," she said musingly, "I believe a new dress would help your feelings, though." Her eyes lighted. "I've got an idea! Let's take some of this money and buy you a pretty new dress! I think maybe a silk one!"

Jansie sat staring at the girl, waves of incredulity breaking over her. "Why— I— Chris, I couldn't! That money is for—" she faltered in confusion.

"Look, Jansie," Chris was all business now, "you haven't had a nice new dress since I can remember! Even your church

dress is made out of one of Mamma's old ones, and it's faded, awfully faded. Now, you just get right up from there and take some of this money, and we'll go down and buy you a really nice new dress to wear to my graduation tonight!"

Jansie threw aside the sheet and crawled out of bed. "I ain't going to do no such-a thing, Chrissie Sanders," she announced, but her tone was already lacking conviction. After all, this was Chrissie's big day, and if Chrissie wanted her to wear a new dress, why—

"I really think," Chris went on thoughtfully, "that we ought to put the rest of that money in the bank after we buy your dress. It's kind of foolish to leave it lying around here where just anybody could come in and get it. We'll start a college fund!" She ran to the bureau and, picking up a brush, went to work on her curls. "Come on, Jansie, let's get started."

Jansie looked doubtful and stubborn at the same time. "I ain't said I'll buy no dress," she announced. "And I ain't so sure about banks, neither!"

"Oh Jansie," Chris grinned and pulled up her nightgown off over her head, "everybody has money in banks and—"

But Jansie's face was musing as she pulled the sheets into smoothness on the bed. "I wonder," she said half-aloud, "how much goods it would take to make me a dress. I wouldn't want to waste—"

"Jansie!" Chris paused in her dressing to stare across the bed at the older woman. "You aren't considering making a dress, are you?"

Jansie smiled gently. "You might just try looking at me, Chrissie," she suggested wryly, "and tell me where you figure I could buy a ready-made dress to fit me."

Chris stared for a moment, then her eyes grew uncertain and fell. "But how are you going to make a dress in a day, Jansie?" she asked.

"I guess Miz Cockrill will be able to help us," Jansie said cheerfully. "We can work on her sewing machine."

Chris stood for a long moment and her hazel-eyes were quiet, but there was a pity within their hazel depths. "All right, then, Jansie," she agreed gently, but very stoutly, "I'll go buy

some material for you if you want me to, and we'll *make it*, then."

So when Chris came home with the dress material and a bank deposit book for the rest of the lease money, Jansie trudged across the prairie to Grandma Cockrill's.

"Of course I'll help you, Jansie." The old lady was pleased. "I ain't much good at the fancy parts since I've had this arthritis in my hands, but I can still cut, and you can use my machine."

Jansie laid the unopened bundle on the table in Grandma Cockrill's kitchen and handed the little red bank book across to her friend. "I wanted you to see this, too, Miz Cockrill," she said with a shy pride. "This here is to help send Chrissie to college this fall!"

"To college!" Grandma Cockrill took the bank book, eyeing Jansie through her spectacles as she did so. "Why, that's wonderful, Jansie! But how are you going to manage it?"

"I don't know exactly," Jansie confessed, "But we've got this start and I hope to keep selling some of my lace now and then. Chris is getting a scholarship, too, for having the highest grades. And she can work, while she goes, I reckon."

"My! My!" Grandma Cockrill studied the bank book through the lower part of her bifocals. "Fifty-six dollars! You girls are doing fine!"

"We had sixty until Chris took out four to buy me this dress material." Jansie opened her bundle to reveal shimmering folds of soft blue crepe. "I didn't want her to," she added defensively.

"She did exactly right," Grandma Cockrill said stoutly. "You have needed a new dress for a long time, Jansie, and it's high time you had it! Besides, you want to do credit to the smartest graduate in the whole bunch, don't you?" She picked up the lovely silk in her work-gnarled, old hands. "And now, I guess we'd better get right at it! It's going to hump us to make a good dress in one day, even granted we don't have to do any ripping!"

But the dress progressed as if it, too, were conscious of the importance of the occasion. It was finished by five o'clock,

and Jansie took it home with Grandma Cockrill's blessing. "Now don't you go cringing up there to the school tonight," the old lady admonished briskly. "Hold your head up with the best of them, Jansie. You got a mighty lot to be proud of!"

Which was all very well for Grandma Cockrill to say, Jansie reflected sourly, as she stood that evening in front of the wavy mirror in her bedroom. Miz Cockrill had always been as straight and upstanding as — and she borrowed a phrase from one of Annie's old novels — as a pine tree. Although she herself had never seen a pine, it sounded right, somehow. *But me*, she thought as she turned and discontentedly surveyed the strange line that her back and body made, even in the softening folds of the new blue dress, *me, I'm just like one of them gnarly, little, old scrub-oaks! Ain't nothing on earth, not even dressing me up like a Christmas tree, going to make me look like anything!*

Crossly, she jammed her old hat well down over her hair and ears, and picking up her purse, set off for the school. Chris had gone on an hour earlier, looking serene and sweet in her white graduation dress.

But Jansie's discontent faded as she walked slowly through the quiet twilight of the late spring evening. The road to town was dreamy with the deepening season, and even the crunch of her feet on the gravelly edge of the lane was satisfying. Now and then a car passed her.

She looked interestedly at the new little houses that pushed, like a vanguard, toward the prairies about the old Lewis place. *Town's getting bigger*, Jansie thought placidly, *we're going to be living right in the middle of things before you know it!* But the short-cut that she took across a vacant half acre was still sweet with the minute activity of small wild things. And even as she shuffled along the narrow line of the pathway, a cottontail scampered ahead of her and into the brush that still grew rank along the way.

The new houses looked raw and a little gawky against the violated prairie. Jansie, as she passed, looked shamelessly into open windows, where the first lights of evening silhouetted

family activities as on a stage: men in undershirts and sock feet with the evening paper, children gleeful with the release of the first barefoot days, conscientious housewives doing the supper dishes. Now and then a phonograph blared into the still air, and once, she passed a house where a tinkling piano held forth.

It was a comforting sort of walk. *I'm going to see Chrissie graduate*, Jansie told herself. *I've got a nice silk dress like any of the other mothers, and Chrissie is the smartest of the whole class.*

But as she drew nearer the school and saw the parked cars and wagons, the strolling couples, parents in twos, Jansie's misgivings returned with a rush. How was she ever going to go in there and face all those people!

She paused in the shadow of a hedge across the street and studied the situation. People were pouring into every door of the brick building, and it was a bewildering question as to which door was the back one. Chris had told her that one door came into the auditorium from the front, had urged her, in fact, to use that door in order to make sure that she get a good seat. But Jansie hoped with all the fervent shyness of her nature, that no unkind mischance would send her through that one! She'd do well to get in the back way, and under cover of as large a group of people as possible.

At length, goaded by the strains of the beginning overture as rendered by the high school orchestra, she slipped into a loosely grouped mass of people and made her way into the auditorium. Once inside, she drew a sigh of relief, for she was at the very back of the slanting room. It was easy then to slip into a neglected row of seats, unoccupied because of their position behind a pillar.

Everything that happened up to the time of Chrissie's speech was to be always more or less of a blur to Jansie's mind. The unaccustomed situation, the strange feel of her new dress, and the sense of elegant learning that seemed, to the crippled woman, to lie heavy over the schoolhouse, left only impressions in her emotions.

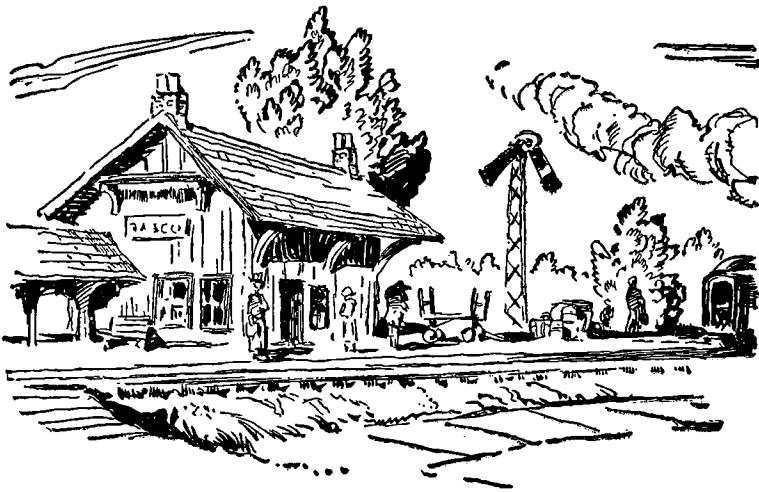
But when Chris stood up to speak, things focussed suddenly. Jansie leaned to peer around the pillar at the tall, sure young figure, and her heart lifted to the hurting point.

To Jansie, it was a magnificent speech. She was quite sure, as she sat, at ease at last, in her dark corner, that all the people about her were stunned by the incredible brilliance of the girlish rendition.

And it was a good speech, too!

When it was finished and Chris was smilingly receiving the cheerful burst of good-natured applause that was partly appreciation and partly the realization that the proceedings were drawing to a close, Jansie sat watching. Chris bowed gracefully to acknowledge the tribute of the cheering, and the crippled woman's face creased in involuntary response as the girl smiled. But her hands were still in her lap. One did not cheer one's own. It would be a kind of bragging.

But wildly, foolishly, exultantly, Jansie was clapping hands in her heart!



14

At the little Collins station, Jansie watched the train pull away, taking Chris to college, and there was within her an unexpected sense of detachment. *There she goes*, the crippled woman thought quietly, and the exultation of the accomplishment was suddenly dimmed by the loneliness that lay upon her day. They had made it, and the hard work and anxiety of the summer months were justified in this moment. It was as if she and Chris had been climbing for a long time and had, somehow, come out upon the crest. But as she stood, listening to the low humming vibration of the rails that had so recently known the weight of the train itself, the knowledge was clear within Jansie that something had ended. And something had begun.

Turning, she looked about her at the unfamiliar scene. Here and there, people lingered, reluctant to leave the clear, still light of the September morning for the weary scents of the little, red brick station. Two or three well-tailored newcomers, recent passengers of the departing train, collected bags

and looked about for transportation to the town that lay in the not-too-near distance. Over to one side a family walked away, subdued in the afterwrench of farewells, and a mail truck, half loaded with the harsh, dark bags, clattered by near Jansie. The porter who was pulling it scarcely glanced at the hunched little figure standing near the track.

I wonder why it is, Jansie thought, that a person don't seem to be stared at so much here at the depot! Maybe travelling is just different from staying at home. Maybe these people is all so anxious to get about their own business that they ain't interested in queer looking people like me. She walked away without self-consciousness, around the corner of the station and up the street that led through the town and toward the shanty. *Maybe, her thoughts went on, it's because people who take trips see so many things to stare at that they ain't so curious.*

And already her horizon had broadened, through Chris, along two humming rails.

But as she walked, as the familiar atmosphere of the town closed about her again, the vicarious thrill of travel wore off, and the sheer desolation of having Chris gone bore in upon her. *She said she'd write me a letter every week,* Jansie thought, and a wryness was heavy within her, *but—*

She stumbled on the edge of the sidewalk, and impatiently flicked a finger at the sudden tears that had come.

And presently, she became aware that feet were moving beside hers along the walk, and that long strides were being shortened to fit her own shuffling steps.

"I just got Chrissie off on the train," Jansie said defensively, without looking up. She knew who it was.

"Yes, I know." Charles Robertson's voice smiled above her head. "I don't blame you for crying a little."

Then, as Jansie made no answer, he went on, "You know, it is a good thing for Chris, though, Jansie."

She nodded wordlessly, and blowing her nose and wiping her eyes again, felt better. She straightened her hat.

They walked along for some time in silence, and the caressing touch of the sunlight was warm against Jansie's face.

A pleasant, unreasoning contentment spread through her. *I always feel like this when he is around*, she thought.

"I was on my way out to your house," Charles told her. "I had some news."

"News?" Jansie looked up at him, and knew that she was glad, whatever it might be, for it had turned his steps toward the shanty.

He had been out to the shanty several times through these past weeks of the busy summer, and at first, Jansie had been sure with all the wry acceptance of her nature, that his visits were merely excuses to see Chris. But as time had passed, she had seen that he had made no special effort to be with Chris, that he had seemed perfectly satisfied if only herself or even R. P. or Willie were there to entertain him. His interest seemed to be in the whole Sanders family.

"I hope it's good news," she told him now.

"Well, I don't know about that," Charles answered cheerfully. "The church may not think so, but *I* like it! I got a letter from Doctor McLean today, and he won't be back until Thanksgiving. He wants me to stay on for three more months."

Jansie's heart swung with a sudden lurch of joy. "Why, I think that's fine, Mr. Robertson," she said matter-of-factly. "But how about the schooling that you planned to finish up this year?"

"I can make it up," he told her. "It will mean a great deal to me to have the extra months of work. I've made a lot of debts in these last few years of preparation for my work."

But Jansie was hardly hearing the words, as he went on to speak of his hopes and plans, so deep was her sense of contentment in the sound of his voice beside her as she walked.

They were almost out of the town now, passing the new, little houses on the prairie to the shanty. The morning lay, sweet with sun, all about them, warming all life with the first gentle ripening of the fall. Jansie looked about her and the morning. All of it was hers. She felt at one with everything, the bustling housewife hanging her sheets in gleaming cleanness on her lines, the little boy shouting lustily and word-

lessly as he bounced a ball against the side of a house, the smiling farmer who leaned from his rattling flivver to shout a greeting to the preacher. She was a part of it, the crippled woman thought with a kind of wondering surprise. It was all a part of her life, too!

When they came to the shanty itself, they paused outside, reluctant to leave the beauty of the day to go inside. Inside the smithy, they could hear R.P.'s languid hammer on the anvil.

"Does Mr. Sanders do much blacksmithing?" Charles nodded toward the dimness of the smithy doorway. "Is he strong enough to do much?"

Jansie smiled. "Not much, even if there was much blacksmithing to do these days, which they ain't. He's getting too old to get around so good anymore. You see," she stopped and counted in her mind, "I reckon Paw's about seventy-five years old now."

Charles sat down on a large flat rock near Jansie's garden. "Aren't the old man and the boy a great responsibility for you, Jansie?" he asked, and his face was concerned for her. "As Mr. Sanders gets more feeble and unable to work, the burden will be heavier on you, I'm afraid."

Jansie shrugged. "Paw ain't really worked none to amount to anything for years, Mr. Robertson," she assured him. "We just — well — manage. We have the garden patch and the chickens, and Paw plants a little crop every summer. And I sell some lace now and then. We just manage." She sat down on an old tub.

"You manage," Charles smiled at her, "you manage to bring up a girl like Chris, and send her to college!"

Jansie glowed at the praise of Chris. "She is a good girl," she agreed modestly.

There was a long silence as they sat, contented with the small sights and sounds of the morning. Somewhere a meadowlark lifted his bubbling joy, and the sunlight lay healing against the heart.

A teamster's wagon trudged by, the feet of its many mules crunching on the gravel of the lane. The whip of the driver

hissed its long snake-like way across the massed backs of the animals, and suddenly, the morning was darkened by his bitter shouts, his profanity harsh in the peace.

Charles looked quickly at Jansie, distressed for the profanation of the day.

But the eyes and ears of the crippled woman were not open for profanation. Jansie sat, her eyes drifting toward the far reaches of the prairie, so absorbed in her own happy thoughts that she saw and heard nothing. Her face was alight with joy.

And the already-experienced perceptions of the young man drew back in regretful recognition of that too-revealing joy. "Shall we go in, Miss Jansie?" Charles asked quietly. "I'd like to see Mr. Sanders and Willie while I'm here."

All unconscious of the thing that had been in her face, Jansie stood up and led the way into the smithy.

R.P. looked up as their shadows fell across the sunlight in the smithy doorway. "Hello, Preacher," he quavered jovially, "how're you this morning?" His hammer clanged as he motioned the visitor to a box. "Set down."

Charles smiled and sat down on the box. "I like a smithy," he remarked with masculine irrelevance.

Jansie moved on away from the two men and up the steps to the kitchen, her footfalls laborious on the stairs.

In the kitchen, Willie grinned uncertainly at her from his habitual corner behind the stove. She went on to the bedroom, where she put away the ancient best hat and changed her dress. Then she set about putting away the little things that Chris had decided not to take at the last minute.

"Jansie!"

She looked up to find Willie standing in the doorway, his loose face troubled.

"What's the matter, Willie?" she asked absently.

"Jansie!" There was a demanding distress in his tone that caught at her attention. "Jansie, where's Chrissie?"

"She's gone to school, Willie." Jansie rolled a finished length of her lace onto a larger ball. "She's gone away to school."

Willie's face brightened. "Then she'll be home for supper?"

Jansie shook her head, and her tone was patient as she answered. "No, she's gone a long way off this time."

Tears filled Willie's shallow eyes. "But I don't want her to be gone away," he murmured in the voice of a hurt child. "I want Chrissie home here with us!"

Jansie nodded, but her thoughts were busy with her own affairs. "I know, Willie, but —"

"Jansie!" His voice was pleading.

Jansie sighed. "What is it, Willie?"

The big feet shuffled nervously and the big hands moved in a futile gesture, "Everybody's gone off and left Willie, ain't they?"

Jansie paused in her work and faced him. "What do you mean, everybody's gone off, Willie?" she asked.

"Mamma went and died and left Willie, then Joey went off, and now Chrissie's gone." A sob jerked at the stupid voice. "Everybody's going away and leaving Willie."

Jansie stood very still for a moment, and her face was quiet. "No, Willie," she assured him with unwonted gentleness, "Chrissie will come back sometimes, and Paw and Jansie will be here."

Willie's face brightened again. "Jansie won't ever leave Willie, will she?" he asked hopefully and his big frame moved farther into the room. "Jansie won't ever leave Willie, will she?"

Jansie stood, her crippled body twisted and small beside the big perfect body of the halfwit boy. "No, Willie." She reached out a hand to pat his great one with gentle awkwardness. "I'll not leave you, and don't you let it worry you!"

But still the moon-face stared down at her, its eyes troubled. "You won't leave, will you, Jansie?"

She stood looking up at him, puzzled as to how to reassure him. Then, as it came to her, she smiled gently. "No," she said slowly, half to herself, "all my life I'll be here, Willie, with you and Paw." Then, looking up at him, her tone sharpened deliberately. "Now, Willie, you shut up about it and go outside and get out of my way. You hear me, Willie?"

Greatly reassured, Willie hurried cheerfully out to the smithy.

When she was alone again, Jansie went about her work with an absent-minded dispatch. Life without Chrissie was going to be different, she thought grimly, awfully different.

She went into the kitchen, and picked up Chris' old school-books to put them away. But such a pain of loneliness wrenched at her heart that she stood, still staring down at them with sick eyes. In that instant, she knew a deep thankfulness that Paw and Willie were left, that she was not truly alone.

She walked to the windows and stood, still holding the books in her hands, looking out at the sunlit prairie. *That's pretty out there now*, she thought, but even as the picture lay before her eyes, she saw it in her mind, hard and silent under the lock of winter. The months of silence stretched ahead, and the locks of her own heart were heavy. *I don't see how I'll get through this winter without a real word from Chrissie*, she thought with bleak honesty.

"Jansie." Charles Robertson stood in the kitchen doorway. "I'll have to be getting along on my calls, now. But I wanted to tell you to let me know how Chris gets along, how she likes Holden."

"Oh—" Jansie turned from the window at the sound of his voice, and there was deep pain in the dark eyes. "Oh, sure, Mr. Robertson, I'll let you know."

The preacher stood, his face troubled, looking at her, and there was a regretful understanding in his eyes. He started away, down the steps, then, as if in answer to something he had seen in her face, he turned back to ask, "Jansie, isn't there some way I can help you?"

But he did not ask her trouble, and his tone was carefully pastoral.

Jansie's eyes evaded his. "Oh, I reckon I'm just blue about Chrissie being gone," she answered, and her tone was weary.

Charles came reluctantly back into the room, and crossed it to stand near her. "But she'll be home again, Jansie," he

assured her, and his voice was professionally ministerial. "You'll have her letters, too. I understand, my dear."

But Jansie was too absorbed in her own troubled thoughts to listen to his distressed platitudes. "That's just it, Mr. Robertson," she whispered, and her head was bowed before him. "I—I'm afraid you don't understand. If you did, you'd think I was—awful!"

Charles Robertson stiffened, and cleared his throat. "Why—I—" he began, trying to stop her with his tone.

But Jansie was already past stopping. "I ain't told nobody this," she went on, oblivious of the discomfort of her listener, "not even Chrissie. Chrissie don't even know it—" She paused again and there was no sound in the kitchen. "And them what did know it, like Mamma and Mr. Sanders, didn't care."

She stopped, gathering her courage to go on. "You see," she held up Chrissie's old schoolbooks in a small gesture of helplessness. "You see, Mr. Robertson, I—I can't read!"

Charles Robertson stood for a long moment, not answering, but Jansie was too absorbed in her own shamed misery to see the slow red that came, then receded just as slowly from his face.

And presently, reaching over, he took one of the books from her hand and opening it, leafed thoughtfully through its pages. "Would you like to learn to read, Jansie?" he asked quietly, and there was no blandness in his voice now.

Jansie stared at him with unbelieving eyes. "What did you say?" she asked.

Charles smiled, and there was a little shame in his own face. "I said wouldn't you like to learn to read?" he asked, and added, with a new humbleness. "I'll be glad to teach you."

Jansie shuffled over to the kitchen table and sat down there, clasping her long hands together before her like a child. "Do—do you suppose I could learn?" she asked carefully. "Could you learn—teach me to read—good—?" She gestured toward the books before her.

"I don't see why you shouldn't learn to read as well as anyone," Charles answered, and then, as the idea grew in

his mind, "It would be something for you to do, this winter, with Chris away!"

"I could read Chrissie's letters!" Jansie's face was hungry. "That's been making me fairly wild, wondering what to do!" Then, as the enormity of the thing dawned on her, "I reckon I just couldn't do it, though, Mr. Robertson," she said apologetically. "Thank you very much just the same."

The preacher ignored her statement and, going to the table, pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. "Why didn't you learn to read as a child?" he asked in a matter-of-fact tone. "Didn't you go to school?"

Jansie shook her head, and her eyes were fixed on her own hands. "No, nobody thought I'd be needing no schooling," she admitted slowly, "me being like I am. Mamma learned—taught me to count but reading was harder— One time—" She hesitated and it was as if the words were being wrenched from her, "One time, when Chrissie first started to school, I got some of her books, her geography and all, and tried to figure out what the words meant, but—I couldn't—"

"Why didn't you just learn along with Chris?" Charles asked gently.

Jansie looked at him. "It's been hard enough teaching Chrissie right from wrong," she said simply, "without having her feeling that she was knowing more than I was, learning—teaching me to read!"

"It won't be hard to teach you," Charles told her in a cheerful tone. "No one would have to know you're learning until you can do it, either!"

"I'm thirty-five years old," Jansie said, as if this were an unanswerable argument.

Charles' tone brushed it aside as negligible. "I could come here twice a week or so," he planned. "And you could do assignments in between. You ought to make excellent progress. You have a fine mind."

But still Jansie sat silent, looking at her hands.

"And of course," Charles went on, "of course, Jansie, it would be just no time at all until you could be reading Chris' letters all by yourself. No one else would have to see them."

That did it.

Jansie looked up and her heart was in her dark eyes. "All right," she said huskily. "I'll try to learn, Mr. Robertson, but I'm going to feel awful foolish doing it!"

"I know," agreed the man. Then after a long pause, he asked, "Jansie, do you mind if I ask you a personal question?"

Jansie looked up from her hands, her eyes surprised. "Why, no," she answered, "but I reckon I've told you all there is to know about us!" She smiled wryly.

Charles smiled back at her. "No, you've never told me why you haven't joined the church, even though you've brought up Chris as a member."

She sat looking down for so long that he began to be afraid that she would not answer. "I've thought about it," she said at last. "I've thought about it lots of times. But you can see how it would be for me to get up there before all them folks and be baptized—"

"I see," Charles answered thoughtfully, "perhaps—"

"And I reckon," Jansie went on as if he had not spoken, "I reckon that He must understand how I feel about it, Him being like He was—"

"Do you mean Jesus?" he asked.

Jansie nodded. "Yes. I guess He understands."

"Yes, of course." The voice of the preacher was a little puzzled. "Of course, He understands all our hearts, Jansie," he agreed, and his words were cheerfully sure. "We all feel that."

Jansie looked up at him and her eyes were without defenses. "No, He understands me special—," she said simply.

"How's that?" Charles asked.

"Well, you see," she explained slowly, trying to get the words just as they were within herself. "He was looked down on by lots of folks too, and they turned their faces away from Him, too!"

This time it was Charles who sat, his head down, while the moment stretched and stretched—

Jansie sat waiting patiently.

And at last he looked up. "I see," he said and his voice was unexpectedly husky. "I—see, Jansie." And he cleared his throat and, taking out his handkerchief, blew his nose with great vigor. "Well," he suggested gently, "You think about baptism a bit more, Jansie."

Jansie frowned, "I reckon I will. In fact, somehow, I know I will, but give me a little time to get used to the idea."



15

CHRIS studied the girls across the aisle of the rattling day coach. *They are so sure of themselves!* she thought with a hopeless sort of admiration. It was as if they owned everything, the conscientious little local that plied patiently between the junction where Chris had changed from the Collins train and Holden College, the wooded East Texas hills that alternated with the September fields outside the smudged windows, even the well-rubbed, dusty, red plush of the seats upon which they stacked five deep, in moments of squealing competition. They teased the tolerant, elderly conductor who came through the car, shushing them hopelessly. They giggled and plucked at brilliantly streamered ukeleles. They threw costly little cloche hats about with elaborate abandon, and ran quick, slender fingers through boyish bobs. They seemed to own, by some mysterious lien of youth and good living, everything in sight!

One girl in particular, whose poised face and knowingly simple clothes held Chris' eyes in fascinated analysis, seemed

to be the accepted leader. She smiled quietly when the others giggled, and when she spoke, even the shriekers listened. Her worn luggage bore countless half-effaced labels with foreign legends. To be in her circle seemed to give one an indefinable prestige.

Chris looked down at her own good new bag, farewell gift from the Ladies' Aid, and found herself wishing that it were old and a little shabby and very sophisticated.

Eileen Parker, who had got on at Fort Worth after a pre-college shopping spree, was sharing a seat with Chris. Eileen's parents were sending her to the church school in a semi-coercive effort to keep her in line. Torn from the side of Isadora Smith by the more tolerant attitude of Isadora's parents, who took no stock in reports of vaunted atheistic tendencies in the state schools, she had assuaged her own sudden lonely anonymity as a freshman by permitting Chris' companionship from the junction. Now she was wondering, as she watched the others in the car, if she had made a mistake in identifying herself with Chris for even so short a time.

But the delights of having a confidante were greater even than her social caution. "I know who that girl is, that one in the blue suit," she whispered to Chris in an awed voice. "She's Vivian MacComber! You know, MacComber Hall!"

Already impressed well past the saturation point, Chris merely nodded and went on watching.

Attracted by the intent regard of the two girls across the aisle, Vivian MacComber looked at them. Her eyes, with the sure judgment of experience, classified Eileen with one skimming look, then turned on Chris. And for a moment, it was as if Chris were inhabiting the mind of the girl across the aisle. She saw herself as Vivian MacComber was seeing her. She saw the well-scuffed shoes that had done duty since graduation time in the spring, and the neatly-made print dress that Grandma Cockrill and Jansie had so lovingly considered proper for school days. She saw her worn purse and the gloveless hands that held it. She even saw the money for her room and board, tied up in a handkerchief inside the purse, and knew, with this strange double vision of her own

and the other girl's thoughts, that it was going to be desperately hard to make it stretch.

And then, as if a window had been shut over the eyes across the aisle, she saw that judgment had been passed. Vivian MacComber looked away with all the cool serenity of a girl who had seen nothing at all! For Vivian, Chris just didn't exist.

Long after Eileen's facile interest had bubbled on to something else, Chris sat staring out of the train window with a sightless gaze. *I hate her, I hate her*, she thought with reasonless bitterness. *Who does she think she is, anyway?* But even as her thoughts turned angrily, she knew that the intangible thing that she had just seen was very real.

But when the little train had rattled its way to silence at the platform by the college station, Chris followed the others up the car aisle with a sudden bewildering realization that she had arrived. Holden had begun. She looked about her as she inched along, her new bag bumping against her knees, and wondered how many of the others about her had no idea at all where to go.

Outside on the platform there were the joyous clamorings of ecstatic reunions, and everyone seemed overcome to see someone else. Eileen, with the sure instinct of her kind, had melted into the masses of arrivals heading toward the school, leaving Chris to find her way alone.

Something very near panic rose in Chris as she watched the girls in their reassuring clusters. She stood, hurrying her glance past the group of which Vivian MacComber was the gracious center, utterly sure within herself that everyone else on earth knew all about everything.

But at last, as her vision cleared, she became aware that she was not the only one who had nothing to say. Here and there in the crowd, isolated girls, small islands of quietness in the colorful noisiness, stood alone, their luggage about them, or walked away, carrying their own bags. Some of them must be freshmen, like herself, Chris realized, but several others were obviously older.

Chris summoned her courage and spoke to one of these, a thin-faced girl in quiet, neat clothes, who was collecting her belongings with a casual strength and a grim sort of efficiency.

"Could—could you tell me where to go first?" Chris asked in scarcely more than a loud whisper. "I'm new and I don't know what to do first." She smiled uncertainly.

The girl turned a sharp grey glance upon Chris and wrestled her bag from one hand to the other. "Working girl?" she asked in a brusque voice, "or MacComber Hall?"

"Why—I—" Chris answered in bewilderment, "I don't know. I do hope to get a job."

"I see." The girl nodded, and her sharp eyes were kind. "Don't you have a job yet?"

She moved slowly away across the platform, and there was something in her manner that indicated that she expected Chris to accompany her. "Don't you have your room, even?" she asked.

And suddenly Chris knew that she and Jansie had made a mistake. You were not supposed to come down here cold this way, and hope to get work. You were supposed to use influence and pave the way. She shook her head. "No, we — I—didn't know."

The grey-eyed girl bit her lip thoughtfully. "Well," she said slowly, as if the full weight of responsibility rested on her own shoulders. "If you already had a job, I'd say go right to old—to Miss Harwell, who is in charge of working girls, but—" she paused and her quick glance raked Chris with shrewd appraisal, "I'll tell you," she went on with increasing decision. "You'd just better come with me."

By this time they were off the platform, and they were almost alone. The shrieking returnees had coagulated into chattering expeditions that were already drifting away up the tree-lined street toward the buildings in the distance.

Chris' guide set her bag on the ground, jammed her brown hat more firmly down on her straight brown hair, and picking up her bag again, jerked her head toward the walkway under the trees. "Let's get going," she ordered brusquely,

then added, in the tone of one who has no patience with the amenities, "My name's Ray. Ray Parker."

"My name," Chris smiled a little, comforted by this girl's matter-of-factness, "is Chris Sanders."

The remainder of the quarter mile walk was made in placid silence. After noting that her companion seemed to scorn conversation when there was nothing in particular to be said, Chris allowed her faculties to be absorbed in reaching out to the unexpected beauty that lay, increasingly, before them.

Half hidden by great old trees, the like of which Chris' East Texas bred eyes had not seen before, the gracious facades of buildings could be seen, softly red old brick contrasting with the worn sheen of marble and the reassurance of granite. A gravelled drive, less harsh than the precision of pavement, swept in a quiet curve in front of smiling porticoes and away, to disappear under arching shade. Tall windows caught the late light and glowed goldenly back at September. The sweet patterns of strolling groups of lightly dressed girls gave grace to the staidness of the place.

And Chris was sure, as she looked at it all, that as long as she lived, the beauty of it and its memory would warm her heart. Never, no matter what the coming months should bring, in accomplishment or in disappointment, would she be anything but glad to be a part of such serene loveliness!

Evening was already throwing tree shadows across the campus when the two girls came up in front of the main building. "Evers Hall," Ray explained. "Administration building."

They skirted the building and went along a gravelled walkway that meandered under the trees until they came within sight of a newer building, its square lines firm against the sky. "Marton Hall," Ray announced. "Working girls hall. We'll go see old — Miss Harwell first." She led the way up the wide steps.

Several girls passed them in the hall, and Chris watched as Ray greeted them with casual cheerfulness. At the end of the hall they came to a door marked "Office". Ray knocked, then without waiting for an answer, opened the door.

The first impression that Chris had of the woman who looked up from her work at a desk as they came into the room was, that she was not young. It was just that, not an impression of age, just of not-youngness. The second impression was, that she did not like girls. In that moment, as Miss Harwell's eyes studied her through heavy horn-rimmed spectacles, Chris knew that her work was distasteful to the dean of the working girls' section.

"What is it, Parker?" Miss Harwell asked coldly. "I didn't know you were back yet."

"Just got in." Ray's voice was toneless. "This is Chris Sanders, Miss Harwell. She doesn't have her room yet, and she wants to get a job."

Miss Harwell's eyes went inch by inch over Chris. "Why do you want to work?" she asked. "And what kind do you want to do, Sanders?"

"Anything." Chris found herself stiffening to meet the woman's coldness. "And I must work to be able to stay."

"Hmmm." Miss Harwell's eyes roved through the papers in her hands. "There are three openings left in housework, one outside job, and—" Then she stopped. "Do you mean to tell me that you came down here without even a room reservation?"

"Yes, Ma'am," Chris answered.

Miss Harwell sighed as though this were the last crushing disappointment of a defeated day. "Very well." She waved a weary hand of dismissal. "You can stay with Parker for tonight, and we'll see, tomorrow."

"But do you think she is going to give me a job?" Chris scarcely saw, in her anxiety, the square cubbyhole that was Parker's room. "She didn't say she would!"

Ray threw her bag on one of the cot-like beds. "Humph! Don't worry. She always needs girls. I hope she lets you stay here with me as my roommate."

Chris awakened in the half-world of dawn, and for a moment she lay still in the enveloping grayness, still thrall'd in that netherland of consciousness in which the personality is not yet born. Then, as one by one, a hand, a foot, a

thought, she pricked out the landmarks of her own separate existence, she found herself waiting for Jansie to stir beside her.

Then — from somewhere out of the grayness, a bell rang. Its sound came with a sweet clarity through stillness, and it was like a cool hand pulling Chris awake. She remembered where she was.

And through her went such a lurch of nostalgic longing to be at home that she leaned over the edge of the cot, expecting to be sick on the uncarpeted floor of Ray Parker's room.

"Ug-hhhh," Ray sighed with yawning awakening in the other cot, then eased herself over and opened her eyes. "Hi, Chris." Her tone was instantly alert. "How'd you rest your first night in college?"

For an instant, Chris doubted her own ability to speak at all, but driven by some newly touched push of will within herself, she managed a smile. "I slept fine," she admitted. Then added with more honesty, "But when I woke up, I thought I was — home."

Ray grinned at her through the half-light. "You'll wish you were home many a time before you get out of here," she said matter-of-factly. "But don't let 'em get you down, Chris. Don't let anybody stampede you!"

Chris threw aside the sheet and swung her feet to the floor. She looked at the wrinkled folds of her cotton nightgown, and the sight of Jansie's careful stitches jerked at her emotions. Jansie loved her so, and Jansie didn't know, couldn't know, how much she hated college! And Jansie'd been so happy about sending her! Chris felt, in that agonized moment of newness and homesickness, that she had betrayed the very clothes that Jansie'd worked so hard to collect for her.

Ray was up and already half dressed. "Take your time, kid," she told Chris, "Breakfast isn't until seven, but I have to get over and get the lower hall of MacComber started before I eat."

"Started?" Chris forgot her misery in curiosity.

"Yep, started." Ray jerked her shoelaces up with firm hands and tied them into hard knots at the insteps of her brown oxfords. "Part of my job is to mop the floors in the MacComber hallways."

"Oh." Chris lay staring at the other girl with thoughtful eyes. "Is — is it very hard work, Ray?"

"Not too," Ray raised her hand in a cocky little salute as she opened the door. "But hard enough," she said briskly, then peeped back into the room from the hall with a little grin. "Just in case you won't be able to find your way around without me," she told Chris, "the dining room is down on the first floor and you'd better get down there early to avoid the rush. Last comers don't get enough cream."

Chris lay staring at the door that had closed upon the mischievous grin, feeling strangely and inexplicably cheered.

The registrar's clerk was a languid young man with a bright blue tie and a tiny blonde mustache. He sat under a huge picture of a School Founder and surveyed the lined-up girls with bored eyes. "Name?" he queried Chris.

Chris felt thick in the bunchy print dress that Jansie and Grandma Cockrill had considered very suitable and fashionable for school, and her hands looked clumsy and red on the edge of the desk. She was deeply conscious of the line of girls behind her.

"Chris Sanders," she told the young man in a little voice. "I — I'd like to pay just one month's board and room at a time, if that's all right —" she paused and remembered Ray's last minute instructions. "And could you tell me where to go to arrange my schedule to allow for working hours, too?"

"Christine?" The young man raised thin blonde eyebrows, ignoring her question. "Do you mean that your name is Chris-tine Sanders?"

"No, just Chris." A gentle silence seemed to fall over the line behind her. There was a suppressed giggle from somewhere near the back. "No, just *Chris* Sanders."

The young man probably heard the giggle. "Chris isn't a name, my dear!" he said in a patient tone. "Now, please, hurry up and give me your full name."

Bewilderment and humiliation flowed across Chris in choking waves. She just couldn't stand there in all that line of girls and admit that her name was —. Of course she might say it *was* Christine, but then, how could she explain having denied it in the first place?

There was no sure footing in a swirling tide of troubled emotions.

She raised her head, and, like a struggling swimmer in swift waters, her eyes reached frantically out. They caught upon the big picture of the founder above the head of the terrifying clerk. And like a great mirror, the picture caught, on its protecting glass, a reflection of the line of girls.

I am the one in front, Chris thought with the irrelevant clarity of distress. *I'm the scared girl with the tacky dress and the knitted lace collar!*

It was the sight of Jansie's knitted lace collar that did it, perhaps. For, in the time that it takes for light to fall across an ugly picture, to catch the turn of a head, the line of a cheek, the grace of a shoulder, Chris saw her own outlines through Jansie's eyes.

"Look at yourself, Chris!" She could hear Jansie's husky whisper as it had been that night last spring. She could hear it plainer than she had been able to hear it that night, perhaps, for now she was hearing it with her heart. "Look at yourself, Chris! You're just plain beautiful!"

And I am! she thought with a pleased little rush of pride, comparing herself with that crowding line of girls reflected behind her, *even in these tacky clothes, I'm better looking than any of those old girls!*

And Jansie would have been disturbed at the sudden awkward audacity with which Chris turned and deliberately surveyed the line behind her.

There they are, Chris thought rebelliously. *They have everything — money, families and — well — just everything! But*, and she felt, with the thought, some up-welling new strength within herself, *but not one of them is quite as good-looking as I am!*

In that instant of time, on that fleeting promontory of emotion evoked by the very unimportant young man, Chris' beauty became a weapon.

She leaned across the desk and smiled into the startled eyes of the clerk. "My name," she told him in gentle tones, "is Christmas Rose Sanders." She smiled slowly. "And now, I'd like to know to whom I have to go to have my schedule arranged, please."

The young man, who was really shy and often wondered what the girls thought of him, flushed a deep pink. "Er — go to Dean Evans." He scribbled hastily on the forms before him. "He's the one to see."

"Thank you," Chris smiled and walked away, quite aware that the young man was looking after her with puzzled eyes.



16

DEAN Evans' office was brown — all brown. And over it there seemed to lie a thick coating of generations of girls, all kinds of girls. Their ghosts were about Chris as she sat with folded hands, across the desk from the small, chubby but queerly dignified little man. And as she sat, she found herself growing quieter inside, relaxed, and with an endlessness of time before her. The heady, new rebelliousness that had marched with her as she had come in here, fluttered, and then lay still beneath the calm regard of the gently knowing eyes of the little man behind the desk.

"Hmmm." Dean Evans' round face was serious as he studied her scholarship. "Valedictorian in your class, eh? Plan to teach?"

Chris nodded. "Yes, sir. I hope — hoped — to get a two-year certificate at the end of this year's work, then teach in some small school next year, and go on in the summers."

The brown eyes studied her from behind the shining lens of his glasses. "I see. And you would like a job, too, while you're here, to help pay your way?"

Chris nodded.

"Well." The brown eyes went dark with thought. "It will be hard for you," he glanced down at the paper on the desk before him, "er — Miss Sanders. But it can be done!" He smiled and Chris knew, somehow, that he was smiling at the ghosts in the room. "Some have made it that way, and some haven't. You see, it's a matter of keeping up your school work and supporting yourself too, at least in part. But," he smiled and leaned toward her across the desk, "but for a girl who was the valedictorian of her class, it shouldn't be as difficult as for some of the others."

A warmth of grateful happiness went through Chris. "I — I believe that I can do it, sir," she said simply, and knew that it was true. "I must!"

"There are several loans that we give to girls each year," the Dean went on. "If you'd like to apply for one —"

Chris sighed and a tenseness that had been in her since her coming, let go, chord by chord. "I'd rather work," she said slowly. "I — I don't like to be beholden — obligated if I can help it." But the realization that there were even other paths to her goal was comforting within her.

She stood up, half waiting for a gesture of dismissal from him.

"Hm, just a minute, Miss Sanders." He studied her. "Do you know, I'm sure that we have a good place for you."

He stood up and going to a file near the wall, searched and brought out a card. "You go to this address in the town," he told her. "Miss Ennie David lives there. She hires a companion from among the school girls each year. We don't send girls out to work in the town as a general thing," he explained as he handed the card to Chris. "But Miss Ennie is the exception. She is the daughter of one of the first presidents of the school, and we feel free to let our girls go into that home. You will, if you take the place, stay in the dormitory. But you will be at Miss Ennie's for a specified number of hours each day." His eyes smiled at Chris. "I believe she usually has the girls read aloud to her, or write

letters in longhand. Miss Ennie has a prejudice against typewriters, against most modern inventions, in fact."

"I see." Chris found herself smiling back. "I — I'll be glad to get the place, sir."

She hesitated, trying to express her gratitude in better words, but the little dean was already turning back to the big desk, and she could see that she was, even now, scarcely more tangible to him than one of the ghosts. "You'll be fine, you'll be fine," he told her absently. "I'm sure that you and Miss Ennie will get along—" His voice trailed away.

And Chris slipped out, feeling curiously disembodied.

* * * *

It had been an exhausting day for Chris. And now, as she sat waiting in the dim hallway for Miss David to come down, she was being forced to add one more emotional impression to the already indigestible accumulation that lay within her. For she had not, in all her eighteen years, set foot before in such a house as this, nor had she, in the whole previous course of her life, seen anything quite like it.

For the feeling that lay, like an aura, over the dimmed reaches of the high-ceilinged old rooms, was not just born of money. Chris had seen fine houses, finer than this, limited as her experience had been. For even a Sanders couldn't live in a town that boasted several growing oil fortunes without seeing something of the smooth goodness that money could obtain.

No, it wasn't just money, she thought wonderingly. There had been money, here, of course. One didn't get such sweetly turned lines in furniture, such silky depth of carpet pile, such a sense of spaciousness in rooms, without spending a great deal of money at some time or other. But even Chris' inexpert eye could catch the duller islands of exquisite darning in the gleaming sweep of rich, old brocades.

It was more than money. There was Time here, days and months and years, decades of time, ticking sleepily away in the voice of the French clock on the mantel. There was

learning, too, she added in her thoughts, learning that lay about the rooms and was tucked between the crackling morocco of the bindings in the bookcases. It was learning that had grown so old in its own familiarity that it had ceased to be self-conscious.

But there was something else, Chris decided, and she could not define it. It was there, though — some facet of the spirit that lay about her as she sat waiting.

It was not until she had heard the footfall on the black gleaming of the shadowed stairway that rose from the hall into the dimness above, it was not until she had seen the light fall of a slender hand and the imperious curve of the wrist above that hand, that she understood its meaning.

It was *pride* that she had felt about her in the house. It was old, old pride that had fed upon itself until it lay like a plaintive spirit through the beauty of the fading rooms.

"Yes?" Miss Ennie David stopped at the foot of the stair and looked at the girl before her. "Did you want to see me?"

Chris looked at her, and for a startled instant, decided that the woman was transparent! Then realizing that it was no more than a trick of the gloom and an almost emaciated thinness, she managed an answer. "Yes, Ma'am. I'm Chris Sanders. Dean Evans sent me to you."

Miss Ennie smiled. "Of course." Her voice was like the thin, true ring of a perfect small bell. "He promised to send me someone as soon as he could. Come into the drawing room, dear."

In the drawing room, Chris eased herself, at Miss Ennie's gesture, into a delicate chair that was so much like its owner that she found herself doubting its ability to hold her.

Miss Ennie drifted to a chair across from the girl and sat silent for so long that time seemed to stop.

Chris waited and the French clock ticked with soft accusation. It said five o'clock, and as she had left the campus at five o'clock, and had waited several minutes in the hall while the elderly colored woman had gone for Miss Ennie, Chris decided that it *must* be slow.

And not knowing what to say, she said nothing.

Presently, Miss Ennie smiled brightly as if continuing a sprightly conversation. "And now, Miss Sanders, let's get down to business! You seem to be a nice girl, and," she peered through the dimness, "pretty, too! Did Dean Evans tell you about my — er — arrangements?"

"No, Ma'am," Chris wished that she could think of some substitute for *Ma'am*, as it sounded so ignorant and countrified. But some respectful form of address seemed an imperative with this frail little person. "He just said to come talk to you."

"I see." Miss Ennie hesitated, then went on, her voice hurried. "I need a nice, bright girl to help me with my correspondence, mostly social," she simpered gently. "And I pay three dollars a week, and meals when you are working." She looked at Chris with anxious eyes and added. "You'll eat here quite often, and they'll make a reduction in the school dining room."

Chris sat for a long, stunned moment. Three dollars a week!

And out of it she must pay board and books and clothes!

She looked up and caught the faded eyes watching her, and she could not read their expression. "Can you manage on that?" asked Miss Ennie.

Chris tried to sort out her thoughts as she stood up. "I — I'll have to think it over," she said, and her voice seemed loud and crude amid the delicacies of the room. "I'll have to see what I can do."

Miss Ennie smiled, and for a moment, Chris thought she saw a wistfulness. "I hope you can," she said quietly. "I — I'm afraid that I won't be able to pay more, but if you could find yourself willing to come for that —" her voice drifted away on a note of fading gentleness.

Outside, in the late afternoon sunlight, Chris went slowly down the tree-edged, brick walk to the street.

Ray Parker was waiting for her on the sidewalk. "One of the girls said she saw you coming in here," she explained,

"so I figured you must be the one Dean Evans was sending to Miss David. Get the job?"

Chris drew a deep breath. "She offered me three dollars a week and part of my meals." She looked at Ray. "How's that for generosity?"

Ray grinned. "That's all she ever pays. That's the reason she always has a freshman, I guess. You going to take it?"

"How could I manage on that?" Chris demanded. "I'll have to try to find something that pays a little better."

Ray made no answer, but walked along beside her, her face thoughtful. "I don't know, Chris," she said presently. "You've got that scholarship for your tuition, and a little money for your room and board, haven't you?"

"Well, yes," Chris admitted. "I worked in the dime store this summer, and Jansie, that's my sister, managed some more for me, but it's not enough to cover anything else, if I pay my board with it."

"You'll get part of your meals at Miss David's," Ray went on in a musing tone, "and you'll have the three dollars—"

"For books, and fees and any clothes—" Chris made an eloquent gesture at her print dress. "I did want to get something that looked right, Ray!"

"The work isn't hard," Ray reminded her, smiling wryly down at her own work-roughened hands, "and there's some time to study on the job—"

Chris smiled. "You sound like you think it's a good job, Ray," she told the other.

"There's something against it, though," Ray said honestly. "Most of the girls who work for Miss Ennie complain about it."

"What is it?"

"Miss Ennie," Ray told her, "tries to make over every girl she gets into a—" and her husky voice dropped to a mincing imitation of Miss Ennie's fragile tones, "into a perfect little lady!"

Chris stared at Ray. "You mean she tries to tell you how to act?" she asked. She paused in the long afternoon light.

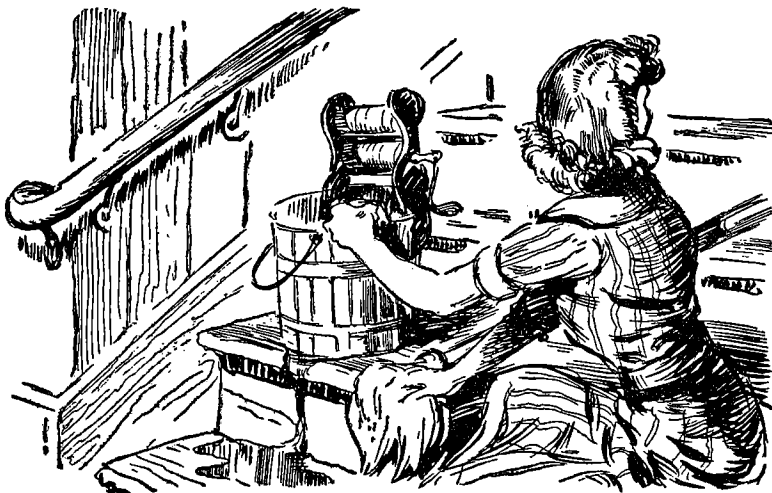
"I mean she tells you how to hold a fork and how to walk into a room!" Ray said hotly. "One girl quit a couple of years ago, when I was a freshman, because Miss David used to send her to the bathroom to clean her nails! I wouldn't take that from anybody!"

Chris looked at her new friend for a long moment with absent eyes, and then walked on toward the campus, her face thoughtful. As the two girls came nearer, the long fingers of sunset wove between the trees, and the windows of the halls were golden. Chris looked and remembered the sense of beauty that had been hers yesterday as she had come up this same walk. The peace of the campus was strange with beauty before her.

It has something, she thought with a sudden clarity. It has something that Jansie and I haven't known. We've never had a chance to know it!

"Well—" Ray broke the silence with a brusque little interrogation. "What you going to do?"

"I'm going to take the job," Chris answered quietly.



17

CHRIS," Ray's voice came quietly through the dimness that hung above the green-shaded study lamp on the table, "you want to make a dollar?"

Chris raised her head, and her eyes were reluctant to leave the pages of her book. "What do you think?" she smiled absently. "How?"

Ray stood up, stretching nervously, and walked to the window. She pushed aside the scrim curtain and looked out, her gaze thrusting past the imaged room that lay shallowly against the pane and the night. Bright drops of the endless rains of late autumn flashed momentarily into view, their lances quickly blunted on the inviolable glass. "One of old Harwell's girls is sick." Her voice was more subdued than its usual brisk huskiness. "You know, that little one who always has the sniffles, Betty Day."

Chris frowned and the image of Betty Day was in her thoughts. "What's the matter with her?" she asked. "Anything serious?"

Ray pushed a thoughtful finger down the cool surface of the window, and swift rivulets of moisture trailed ahead of her hand. "Pneumonia," she said simply, then added, "MacComber's been a mess lately. All that mud."

Chris' smile was wry. "All right, I'll come. I need the dollar." She started to go back to her book, but disturbed by something in Ray's mood, she sat idling the pages. About her, the little room lay, like a quiet pool, its stillness broken only by the gentle hiss of the radiator and the simmering whisper of the cocoa in a pan on the hot plate in the corner. Lying on the table, within the circle of light from the study lamp, was a letter from Jansie.

Chris looked at it. *Jansie is learning to write, she thought gently. Someone is teaching her, probably the preacher.* For in Jansie's labored letters, there had been frequent mention of Charles Robertson, his statements and actions, his regular visits to the shanty.

All fall she had had the stiff, careful little notes from Jansie. Each week, she could see an increasing sureness, less evidence of copying and more of Jansie's own thoughts. Letter by letter, Jansie was beginning to find her way in the strange and unnatural business of words.

Chris reached over and, picking up the letter, closed it between the pages of her book. Then she sat, her mind tired and a little slow, thinking about the matter of Jansie's learning to read. Ever since she had reached her own growing up years, she had known, within herself, that Jansie could not read. But some reticence, some fierce independence, so characteristic of Jansie, had kept her silent on her knowledge. *I could have taught her as I learned, she thought now, but I didn't dare. She would have hated having me do it. And now someone else is teaching her, and I'm glad.*

Ray came away from the window, and jerked at her chair with a sharp clatter. "Rain, rain, rain, rain!" Her voice was bitter. "Oh, if it'd only let up!"

It was still raining when Chris came up to the second floor of MacComber the next day. She stood looking at the tracked linoleum of the hallway and the smudged baseboards and

wondered how Ray was going to be able to mop the first floor at all. *I guess their feet lose a little of the mud on the way up the stairs*, she thought grimly, *not that it makes much difference.*

She hooked the soggy mop over the edge of the bucket and twisted the handle of the wringer with her foot. The suds smelled heavily of disinfectant and strong soap. Lifting the mop, she dropped it into the middle of the worst spot at the head of the stairs, and slowly a circle of cleanness appeared beneath her circling motion. When the mop was heavy with mud, she lifted it back into the bucket.

Several girls came clattering up the stairway, their laughter preceding them. Chris pulled her mop and bucket out of the way, and waited for them to pass, wiping her hands on Ray's coarse denim apron. *I guess Miss Ennie'd say I ought to use gloves*, she thought wryly. Miss Ennie always insisted that you could tell a lady by her hands. *I reckon she'll manage to make a lady of me yet!*

With one damp finger, she pushed a dark curl behind her ear. She was glad that she had bobbed her hair, though she hadn't dared to write Jansie about it yet. It was much less trouble than the curls had been, and still insisted on curving into flying ringlets at the end.

All the girls coming up the stairs had bobbed hair.

Vivian MacComber came among the last of the group, her steps poised on the stairs. Chris watched her. Vivian wore galoshes, unbuckled and flopping about her ankles. And on her, the effect was smart and knowing.

As she reached the top of the stairs, she looked down, a small frown creasing her forehead. "Look at that!" She held up her left foot, where a large blob of mud clung to her overshoe. "I wish it would stop raining!" She stooped and with a slender finger flicked the mud to the floor and walked on down the hall.

The next girl stepped on the clump, spreading it into a wide smear in the middle of the freshly mopped place.

Chris waited stolidly until every girl was out of sight around the echoing corners of the hall, then remopped the area around the top of the stairs.

Ray was sitting by the radiator, her damp feet propped against its warmth, when Chris came back to the room at the end of the afternoon. "Well, how'd you make out?" Ray grinned and slid lower on her spine. "Get it done?"

"Yes." Chris walked over and taking off the heavy apron, hung it on a nail behind the door. "Yes, and Harwell paid me." She went to the dresser and opening a drawer, took out a small box and slipped a dollar bill into it.

"Saving for something?" Ray inquired idly.

Chris closed the little box and pushed it back under her clothes, her face thoughtful. "Galoshes," she said briefly.

Chris squeezed the suds through the dark wetness of her one good pair of silk stockings and watched absently as the water swirled down the slow drain. All about her, stretched on thick twine across the length of the room, hung on wire hangers above the radiator, and even on the towel racks over the washbasin, was the week's laundry. The room smelled of soapsuds and damp cloth.

Outside, it still rained.

The door opened and Ray came in and closed it behind her, too carefully. "Chris!" She stood against the door, still holding the knob, and her voice caught at Chris' attention, so that she looked up quickly. "Chris, little Day died!"

"Oh my!" Chris let the wadded stockings fall back into the lavatory and wiped her hands on a towel. "Oh, Ray, when? How do you know?"

Ray sighed and taking off her coat, laid it on her cot and sat down on it. "Old Harwell just told me," she said dully. "She was crying!"

Chris stood for a long, troubled moment, then, not being able to think what to do, went back to her washing. "Oh my!" she said again. Then she asked, her face thoughtful, "Was old Harwell mean to her, Ray?"

Ray kicked at the leg of her cot. "No," she admitted grudgingly. "No, Harwell treated her just like she does the rest of us, fair enough, but no love lost."

Chris sighed and went on washing.

"They're going to have a sort of funeral here tonight," Ray went on, "before her father, who came yesterday, takes her — her body home on the nine-o'clock train."

Chris hung the stockings on the towel rack. "I've got to go to Miss Ennie's this afternoon," she told her roommate. "Her nephew is coming for the week-end and bringing a friend. Miss Ennie gets all excited."

Ray nodded, and Chris went to the closet for her coat. When she was ready to go out, she paused for a moment, looking at Ray with troubled eyes. "Look, Ray," she said, and leaned over to pat a wiry arm. "I'm awfully sorry about Betty!"

Ray nodded.

Chris straightened up and went to the door. "All this rain," she said, as if it explained something. "Somehow it seems to make it worse!"

She walked back to Marton from Miss Ennie's in the quick, cloudy twilight. She was all alone in a world of dripping trees and low clouds, for the campus dinner bell had just rung. Gray fingers of an evening mist crept through the branches that hung above the gravelled walk. Chris shivered and drew up her coat collar to meet the soft folds of Miss Ennie's blue scarf.

"Wear it, Chris," Miss Ennie's gentle voice had insisted. "I'd feel responsible if you took cold going back to the dormitory." And Chris had accepted, not from inclination, for she did not mind the misty rain on her hair, but because Miss Ennie's mildness held the implacable quality of a force of nature.

Chris, will you please dust the drawing room? Goldie's eyes are so bad that she misses dust.

Chris, will you please see about the little cakes for tea? Carl hates them fussy.

Chris, would you mind seeing that Goldie puts the new percale sheets on Mr. Duncan's bed?

Chris grunted and jerked the knot of the scarf a little higher under her chin. She just felt all out of sorts with everything on earth today.

The chilling mist dripped onto the darkened brownness of the fallen leaves beside the path, but ahead of her, MacComber reached out warm arms of light.

Poor Betty, Chris thought suddenly.

The lights of a car swept around the curve of the drive, stroked over her, and went on past. She stepped aside to let it go by.

It paused, however, near where she was standing. Its body hung, a low red shape in the grey of evening.

Chris glanced toward it, then seeing that it would not be coming on, walked across the drive and into the pathway toward Marton.

"Just a minute, please," a voice called from the car. A tall young man climbed out and came toward her. "Are you Miss Chris Sanders?"

Chris paused and looked back. "Why yes, I am—"

The young man came closer, and smiled down at her. And even in the dusk, she could see that it was a quiet, diffident smile. "I'm Carl David," he told her. "We've just come, and the minute we hit the house, my aunt sent us to bring you this book. She said you'd need it." He held out Chris' Education One textbook, and his smile was gentle for his aunt's foibles.

"Thanks," Chris took the book, and looked up at the young man. "I won't have a chance to study tonight, anyway, but it's nice of you to bring it. I —" and she wondered as she said it why she should be telling this young man, "You see, a girl died today, and there's to be a funeral."

"Oh, I'm sorry. It will be depresssing to go to a night funeral, won't it?" And for some inexplicable reason his voice lightened her brooding sense of sadness and dissatisfaction.

It was at this instant that the dimness of the mist and the late afternoon was pierced by the sharp glare of a floodlight.

Before Chris could be more than startled, her companion faced the light and shouted, "Hey, Jack! Cut that thing off!"

Chris stared with wide eyes at the light. A warmly impertinent voice remarked from the car, "Ohhh, boyyyy!"

The light went off.

"I'm sorry." Carl David sounded irritated and amused at the same time. "It's Jack. You see, he has that thing on his car just for the purpose of looking people over when they least expect it."

Chris laughed. "I see! Well, it's somewhat startling, to say the least." She smiled, and turned away. "Thanks again for bringing my book to me and — good-night."

"Waaait a minutel!" a reproachful voice entreated from the car. "Don't break it up yet, Dave. I'd like a little chance, myself!"

Another tall figure detached itself from the low car and hurried to stand beside them. "Here I am!" Jack announced brightly.

Carl David sighed elaborately. "Miss Sanders, *may* I present my very good friend, and I might add, my sorest trial, Jack Duncan?"

Chris smiled and held out her hand, and a delightful new sense of excitement possessed her.

Jack engulfed the hand with a big paw, and beamed. Beside Carl's dark slenderness, he looked big and blonde and massive. But he bowed with surprising grace, and his voice held a knowing undercurrent of private laughter. "I'm delighted, Miss Sanders," he said gently. Then, straightening, he reached a quick, deft hand and untying the knot of Miss Ennie's scarf, swept it from her hair. "There now," he nodded with serious satisfaction, "It's just as I thought! She's beautifull!"

Chris stood before him, and waited, unadmittedly pleased, as his eyes surveyed her up and down.

"Look at that, Carl!" he said again. "Isn't she a beauty!"

Carl David shrugged almost angrily and turned back toward the car. "Look Jack," he said sharply, "you'll scare the poor girl to death. That is, if you don't give her pneumonia

standing out here in the rain!" He paused and looked back, and his face was stern. "Don't let him rush you, Miss Sanders," he told Chris, and his voice was more than half serious. "He eats pretty girls!"

Chris looked up at the big figure standing before her. "Does he?" she asked coolly. And some instinct within her was dictating her tone. She snatched back her scarf. "Then I think you'd better go, Mr. Duncan. You see, I don't like being eaten!"

Jack Duncan reached a big arm to block her way. "No, please," he begged softly, "stay just a minute. Let me look at you — Chris — and tell me when I can see you again?" One hand drifted down the length of her shoulder and caught at her arm. Its touch was firm.

Chris looked down at her arm, and twisted away from the impertinence of his hand. "I really must go," she assured him. Then, as the hand on her arm merely tightened, she kicked sharply toward his shin, "So, if you'll —" she kicked again, "excuse me, please!" But there was no anger in her tone, only an answering impertinence of laughter.

Jack yelped and clutched his bruised shin. "You little rascal," he said admiringly, as Chris turned away.

"Come on!" roared Carl from the car.

Jack groaned aloud. "I'm coming!" he called in a lugubrious voice, and Chris knew, even as she walked away under the trees, that he was still watching her.

Then, out of some instinctive familiarity with the moves of this exciting new game, some knowledge from deep within herself, she looked back over her shoulder at him — and smiled.



18

THE rain stopped for a few minutes just at sunset. Long fingers of flame groped upward from the cracked clouds into the overhanging gray. In the east, dark masses muttered against the horizon, and silent lightning flashed warning that the storm was not done. Radiant swords of light pierced the thin curtains and stabbed the wall of Chris' and Ray's room, touching, with glorifying power, the radiator, the edge of a door, the gleaming enamel of the lavatory, and altogether bringing out a latent charm in the commonplace things of everyday.

Chris, already dressed for the funeral in a respectful Sunday black skirt and jacket, opened the window and leaned out to the glory. "Ray!" She drew a deep breath of the mingled scents of evening and autumn. "It's simply lovely outside just now!"

Ray smiled absently and straightened her collar, her face somber with the thought of the hour ahead. "I hope it stays

clear until after the funeral," she answered. "Her father is — is taking her home on the nine-o'clock train."

There was a knock at the bedroom door. Chris closed the window, and went to answer.

It was the floor proctor. "The lights are giving trouble again, Chris." She reached into a large paper bag and brought out two thick, white candles. "You'd better take these along, just in case. Dean Evans says everyone must go, and these are just in case." She smiled and hurried away to knock on the next door.

By the time Chris and Ray had joined the scattered groups making their way across the campus to the chapel, the storm was beginning again. The girls went up the wide steps into the flower-sweetened atmosphere inside just as the first flicks of rain were appearing against the darkened surface of the saturated ground.

Most of the girls had worn their Sunday black, and the quiet-faced rows were uniform looking in the dimmed light. The scent of flowers and the feeling of solemnity lay heavy, almost tangible, over the whole place; even the busy feet of the ushers were quiet in the aisles. Chris, her emotions already raw to the soft-voiced quartet that was beginning a song, looked at Ray, and she saw that her roommate was sharply touched.

Dean Evans, standing above the open casket, read a few verses of Scripture and spoke simply, his round face troubled and sad. The tragedy of the slim little figure lying amid the silken splendor was heavy on them all.

The last move of the service, that walking by to view the quiet sleep that had overtaken another, was beginning. Already two rows of girls, one in each long aisle, were moving forward, their faces pale and grave with the moment.

There was a sharp flash, a nerve-jerking crash of sound and the lights went out.

No one spoke or exclaimed, so heavy is the hand of respect for death, but unreasoning fear was thick in the darkness. Then the candles of the proctors flared infinitesimally in the gloom, and, candle by candle, down the aisles and across the

rows, light came again. Dimly, the faces of the girls appeared, and reality, distorted by the strange illumination, came, too. The candles moved on, bent a little above the casket, then straightening, went on again. All unknowing, little Day lay on in the unassuming dignity of death.

Chris and Ray paused near the side door through which they had made their exit, and the wet sweep of the storm's violence shoved against them. Ray shivered and threw her coat about her shoulders. "Let's make a run for it, Chris," she suggested in a voice husky with feeling. "We're bound to get wet."

Chris nodded, making no effort to speak around the torturing tightness of her own throat, and drew her coat up over her head, preparatory to leaving the overhanging shelter of the portico under which they were standing. But before they could move away, several running figures, heavily coated against the rain, appeared out of the darkness toward the front of the building.

"Oh, my goodness!" a laughing voice exclaimed. "This is awful!"

Chris and Ray waited for the group to pass and leave a cleared path for their own dash to Marton. In the half-light coming from the door behind them, Chris recognized one of the girls as Vivian MacComber.

"I hate funerals, anyway!" one of the girls complained. "I always cry."

"This one was a particular nuisance," agreed Vivian. "I was supposed to meet Jack tonight, and now, I can't see him until tomorrow!" They were past now, but her voice came back clearly in a lull of the wind. "Really, — all that trouble for a working girl!"

"Did you hear her!" Ray muttered angrily as they ran side by side under the dripping trees. "A nuisance, is it? I — I wonder how she'd like for someone to call her funeral a nuisance!"

Chris made no answer.

But when they were in the shelter of their own room, she took her wet coat off her head and shook it absently. "All

that trouble just for a working girl," she quoted thoughtfully. Going to the radiator, she turned it on and stood, her back to it, as the steam grumbled reluctantly into its vitals. "Ray," she said presently, "who is this 'Jack' she's talking about?"

Ray looked up in surprise. "Why, I don't know much about her affairs," she answered, indifferently, "but I guess she meant Jack Duncan, her boy friend."

"And just who is Jack Duncan?" Chris went on.

"Look, Chris," Ray's voice was hurt, "I don't feel like talking about Vivian MacComber's love affairs, if you don't mind! I — I feel pretty badly about little Day, you know. I knew her well."

But there was a compelling new hardness in Chris' tone. "No, tell me all you know, Ray," she demanded. "I've got a reason to ask."

"Well," Ray frowned, but complied, "he's Vivian MacComber's special property I guess. He's down at State, and comes up to see her now and then. I guess — from the way the girls talk, that he is *something*."

"Yes, how?" Chris insisted.

"His father is rich, they say." Ray's voice held all her distaste for the subject. "He's from Tulsa, Oklahoma, and they've got oil money or something. I guess he and Vivian are two of a kind. Now," her tone was cool, "will you let me drop the subject of Vivian MacComber?" She stood up, and picked up her coat and headed for the closet.

But Chris stood still before the radiator, her face quiet, for a long moment. Then, strangely, she smiled and stretched lazily, an unaccustomed gesture.

Ray turned to stare at her roommate with irritated eyes. "What's the matter with you, anyway, Chris?" she demanded. "You act positively pleased over something!"

Chris shook her head and going to the mirror, studied her reflection. She pushed back her hair, and studied her eyes, and lips and mouth. She even opened her mouth and examined her teeth. Then, tilting the mirror to catch her full length, she stared at her figure. Her expression was speculative.

"Ray," she said at last. "I'm sick of Vivian MacComber!"

Ray nodded, "Yeah," she agreed drily, "but what —?"

"In fact," Chris went on, "I'm just about sick enough to see if I can't manage to do something about it!"

Ray just stared.

"And so," Chris turned and Ray was startled at the cold purpose that she saw in the hazel-green eyes, "I've decided that maybe little Vivian isn't going to see her precious boyfriend tomorrow, after all!"

As if in repentance for the stormy night, morning came clear and shining with the last lingering glow of autumn. Chris did not have to go to Miss Ennie's as it was Saturday, so she and Ray hurried about, cleaning the room, getting their clothes in shape, and generally preparing for the rigid inactivity of a Holden Sabbath.

When the work was finished, Chris combed her hair and put on a worn white blouse, softened by many washings almost to the texture of silk.

Ray looked up from her mending. "Where you going, Chris?" she asked in surprise. "You can't go to town till this afternoon. It's against the rules."

Chris wrinkled her nose at her roommate's reflection in the mirror. "Remember what I told you last night?" she asked.

Ray dropped her work in her lap and stared incredulously. "You don't mean that you really are going to try to get Vivian's boyfriend, do you?" she asked. "I thought that was just daydreaming."

Chris rolled the long sleeves of the shirt-like blouse above her elbows. "I meant it, Ray," she said seriously. "Do you mind if I use a pair of your stockings? Mine aren't dry."

Ray waved an absent hand. "Go ahead," she said, but her thoughts were not on hose. "Chris, how are you going to do it?"

Chris shrugged. "I don't exactly know yet," she admitted. "But as a starter, I'm going over and see if I left my notebook at Miss Ennie's yesterday."

Ray looked shocked. "Your notebook is right there on the table in front of you, Chris Sanders!"

Chris smoothed her hair back from her face and studied the effect with narrowed eyes. "I know that!" She was unperturbed. "But I've got to have some excuse to get out and go over there, haven't I?"

Ray laid down her work and getting up, came over to the dresser to face Chris. "Look, Chris," she said in a carefully reasonable tone. "You can't manage that guy. He — he's pretty strong medicine for you!"

Chris turned and her eyes were cool. "Why can't I?" she asked.

Ray looked confused but determined. "I don't exactly know," she said thoughtfully, "but I'm right, Chris. A girl has to have — oh well — money or family prestige or something like that to be able to handle a fellow like Jack Duncan! You are so — sort of unprotected!" She looked distressed.

Chris turned and leaned back against the dresser, and stood looking down at the toe of her shoe. "I know what you mean, Ray," she admitted slowly, "and generally, I believe you're right. But somehow," she frowned and moved her toe in a circling motion, "this time you're wrong! I can't explain it, but I know I can manage him!"

Ray stared at her. "What do you intend to do with him?" she asked, as if the thing were already accomplished, "when you get him?"

Chris looked up, and Ray was surprised to see tears in the hazel-green eyes. "I'm so sick of being poor," she said simply. "Look, Ray." She held out a hand as if pleading with her roommate to understand. "Half the time I'm a little bit hungry, because the meals I eat at Miss Ennie's are so skimpy. I haven't had a new dress since I've been here at Holden, just blouses and skirts that I got to take the place of those awful ones Jansie and Grandma Cockrill made for me. And then, too, there's this never being anybody much! You know," her voice grew bitter, "'All that trouble for just a working girl.'"

Ray went back to her cot and sat down. "I do know," she agreed, thoughtfully, but there was no bitterness in her voice. "This is my third year of it. But it can't be helped, I guess, and the best way to get along is not to fuss too much about what you have, just do the best you can!"

"You sound like Jansie." Chris grinned a little. "But I'm tired of doing the best I can!"

Ray's brown eyes were shrewd. "I'm not a knockout in looks like you are, Chris," she said quietly, "and maybe you'll tell me to mind my own business, but — Jansie might be right!"

"Maybe she is," Chris' voice was harder, "But I'm going to see if I can't get some of the things I want in my own way."

She turned away toward the door.

"Wait a minute, Chris," Ray's voice was gentle, "Tell me one thing before you go. What does Jansie want you to do with your life?"

Chris looked back from the door, then came back to sit on the edge of her own cot, "She wants me to teach school," she answered, "And save my money and get my degree. Jansie has a healthy respect for education," she smiled, "because she hasn't had much chance at it." She sat for a moment in thought, then added, "I don't believe that Jansie minds being poor as much as I do, I've never heard her complain."

Ray was silent as Chris stood up.

"So I'll be going," Chris grinned a little at Ray's distressed look, "You might at least wish me luck!"

"Oh, of course!" Ray shook her head, "And you're going to need it, Chris! You're going to need it!"

Chris signed the checkout book in Miss Harwell's office, giving as her reason for leaving the fictitious notebook at Miss Ennie's. Then, even as she started away, she paused and added in afterthought, "Miss Ennie may have some work for me to do," she told the office proctor, "I may have to stay awhile."

The girl waved an absent-minded hand and went on studying. Chris went out into the brilliant, freshly washed sunlight.

It was a wonderful morning to be out under any circumstance, she thought happily. An hour of leisure was a tangible

joy. The sunlight lay brighter than usual on the pathway under the trees, falling through branches partly bared by the storm. A finger of breeze, warm with the afterbreath of summer, touched her neck and lifted her hair. She threw back her head and drew a deep breath for sheer joy.

"Hi!" a voice spoke quietly to her right. She jumped and looked around.

Jack Duncan stood near the path, his blonde head gleaming in the sunlight, his unreadable, blue eyes smiling at her. He was coming from the direction of MacComber. "Hello, there, Chris! I'm glad to see *you* out this morning, anyway!" He waved a gesture at the deserted campus.

Chris did not stop to be amazed at the neatness with which fate had dealt her her wish. "Everyone's busy," she explained, "And besides, you can't see a date here until Saturday afternoon."

"I know that," he leaned against a tree and smiled at her. "How about moving out of range of the halls," he suggested, "where we can talk?"

Chris looked thoughtful, "I was going down to Miss Ennie's," she told him, "if you want to walk down that way with me—"

"Delighted!" Jack's eyes were laughing at her, "It's such a lucky coincidence that we met."

"How'd you happen to come to the campus this morning, anyway?" she asked him as they walked away together toward the town, "You're certainly up early."

"I hoped to see you." Jack grinned and the words were not too serious. "I thought to myself 'now maybe that pretty Sanders girl will find out that she just must go to Miss Ennie's this morning!'"

Chris pouted, "It would have served you right if I hadn't left my notebook there yesterday — maybe."

But after they had left the campus and before they were too near the David house, Jack slowed his steps, "I'll tell you," he touched her arm to bring her to a pause. "I have my car parked down here on this side street. Let's take a little ride."

"I shouldn't," but consent already underlay Chris' tone, "You know how strict they are here about that. We aren't allowed to even get in cars without special permission."

Jack scowled, "Yeah. I know. But we'll be so careful."

Chris smiled up at him, and the sunlight fell warmly through the leaves of the trees against her eyes and hair. "I have to be back before too late," she was already matching her steps to his down the side street. "If Miss Harwell should find out — whoooooosh!" she made a gesture of disintegration.

"Uh, that old dame!" Jack made a disgusted face.

Chris grinned, "Oh, she isn't so bad," she told him and her tone was light, "She just doesn't trust any of her flock with *men*."

They had come up to the car, and Jack reached one hand to open the door for her as he leaned almost to her lips, "You'd better not trust me either, baby!" His tone was softly mocking, "I mean no good!"

Chris laughed and slipped into the low-slung seat.

"Where'll we go?" Jack shifted into second and the car roared away from the curb, "You ever been out on the Wall Mill road?"

Chris shook her head, while deep excitement lurched within her. Wall Mill road was the secluded lovers' lane which the Holden girls discussed in thrilled whispers.

And Chris decided that it was the loveliest drive as well as the loneliest one in the vicinity of the college. Today, it was rich with the full sweep of autumn, and great old trees drooped their colored burdens above the winding gravel of the road.

She drew a deep breath of delight and leaned back against the maroon leather of the seat. But when she spoke, it was not of the day. "It must be wonderful to be rich!" she commented happily, "I've never in all my life ridden in a car like this one!"

Jack looked startled, then pleased, "Well! You are frank!" he laughed at her. "Most girls work as hard as they can to make you think they've always had a million."

"I guess so," Chris was looking away from him, her eyes intent on the scenes through which they were passing, "But most girls, as you put it, have a lot more than I have to bluff with." She turned with a wry smile.

Jack's eyes narrowed a little as he watched the road, "You look very sweet to me," he assured her in a courteous tone. Then he added, making talk, "Why don't you just tell me all about yourself?"

"Why — er — " Chris wished that she hadn't been so frank about her poverty. "Well, we're just ordinary people, I guess. My — er — father is a farmer, then there's my sister, Jansie, and Joe and Willie. Really," she laughed on a quick breath, "There isn't much to tell!"

"Is your sister older or younger?" Jack's eyes were searching along the roadside for some special parking place.

"She brought me up," Chris' voice was suddenly quieter. "She's lots older than I am and — and — very strict." She laughed softly and glanced from the corner of her eyes at the boy sitting beside her, "She might not approve of — you!"

"I like that!" Jack's attention came back with prompt suddenness, "Why wouldn't she approve of me? Is she pretty?" he asked with male curiosity.

Chris shook her head, "No," she admitted gently, "Jansie isn't pretty." And then she added, more to herself than to the young man, "Jansie is just — Jansie."

And there was about them, invoked by the words about the crippled woman, a sense of an alien presence. Jack shifted uncomfortably, not understanding his own self-consciousness.

"Come on," he slowed the car to a wide shoulder at one side of the road, "Let's go sit up there on that rock and tell each other all about ourselves — and look at the scenery."

Chris laughed in response and the shadow of Jansie was no longer between them. "I'll race you!" she opened the door and slipping out of the car, ran for the hill. The wind caught at her skirt and pressed her soft blouse against her body. She flung up an arm to wave at the boy and her hair was about her laughing face, "Come on!" she dared him.

Jack snatched the keys from the ignition and scrambled out after her, "Hey! Wait a minute!" he called, "Wait!"

Chris looked back and seeing his face serious with the pursuit, laughed aloud, "Come on, Jack!" she called again, and her voice was teasing, "You'll have to hurry if you're going to get back in time for that date!"

"Who cares about a date!" Jack was panting from the quick climb, "I don't care if we don't get back before midnight!"

He caught her at the top of the hill.

As his arms went around her, hard, Chris looked back over her shoulder, her eyes laughing. *He likes me*, she thought exultantly, *I've made him like me a lot!*

"Little Miss Ragamuffin!" Jack smoothed back the short dark curls with a roughly gentle hand, "I don't know about that puritan sister of yours, but you've had a mighty good teacher somewhere along the line!"

Somewhere along the line, the thought was suddenly cold in Chris, *where did this new me come from?* she wondered with a frightened sense of discovery then, in a little inner wail, *what has come over me?*

And as Jack leaned nearer, his eyes eager and his lips almost to hers, she recognized, with a startled dismay, how *very* much she really did want him to kiss her!



19

CHRIS dressed discontentedly for her date. It was exasperating to be having to wear that blouse and skirt combination over and over again. But, aside from the jacket and skirt that made up her Sunday outfit, she had, literally, nothing else. That is, unless you counted the homemade print school dresses!

She went to the closet and looked in at the dresses that Jansie and Grandma Cockrill had made for her — three of them so lovingly put together, even to the neat seams and the elegant touches of Jansie's own hand-knit lace. And they were so all wrong! She sighed and wondered how they managed to be so completely tacky! She pulled out one of the dresses and hugged it to her. Somehow, it made her feel a little closer to Jansie. She'd hated to hang them away like that, especially as it had meant cutting her wardrobe to the cotton blouses and skirts that she had been able to buy. But even Ray, with her indifference to the niceties of style, admitted that they just wouldn't do.

She let the dress fall back among the hanging garments and walked to the dresser. Even with the Christmas gift money that the Ladies' Aid had sent her, she just hadn't been able to save enough for a new outfit — even a dress. It was only a quarter or fifty cents at a time at the best, and in the meantime, she smiled wryly at her own image, there were always the blouses and skirts!

The door opened and Ray came in, her coat dangling from a weary arm, "Say! I'm dead!" she dropped the coat on a chair and fell across her bed, "You'd better be thankful that you didn't get a job under Harwell, Chris. She's a slave driver."

Chris reached into the dresser drawer and, pulling out a clean cotton slip, another of Grandma Cockrill's contributions, drew it on over her head. "Sometimes I wish I had got a job with Harwell, Ray," she said ruefully, "I'd at least make a little more."

Ray rolled over on her stomach and groaned, "Don't kid yourself. Harwell takes your lifeblood," then as Chris' face emerged from the top of the slip, she asked, "What's the matter? Clothes?"

"Yes, clothes," Chris said grimly. She turned to the mirror and picked up a comb, "I wonder when Jack is going to get sick of looking at me."

Ray lay, whistling softly through her teeth and eyeing Chris with sardonic affection, "He doesn't seem to be giving any indication of it yet," she remarked. "He's been down here every other week-end since — since —"

Chris grinned into the mirror, "Since I started out to get him," she finished the sentence. "After all, I did, Ray."

Ray smiled back, "Well, you've had the good wishes of half the school," she said cheerfully, "Everybody's been glad to see Vivian MacComber get it in the neck for once." Then, as Chris headed for the closet, she asked, "Why don't you wear my new blue crepe, Chris?"

"Oh, Ray!" Chris stopped in the middle of the room. "I wouldn't think of it! That's your Christmas gift from your mother. But," she went to the other girl and hugged her

affectionately, "but you are a darling to offer, a perfect darling!"

Ray pulled away with a gruff show of impatience. "No, I mean it," she insisted. "Go on and wear it. You won't hurt it."

Jack looked up from his immurement in the stiff-backed chair by the proctor's desk as Chris came in. "Hey!" His eyes lighted admiringly. "That's a good-looking new frock, hon — er — Chris!"

The proctor, a firm-lipped senior in horn-rimmed spectacles, grinned at Chris, "Hello, Chris," she said drily. "I had about decided that *I* was going to have to start holding his hand to comfort him." She eyed the new dress. "Hm, nice!"

Chris looked at her. "It's Ray's new one," she said firmly. "I'm sort of breaking it in for her."

Jack stood up, and Chris handed him her coat and signed the date book.

"Back by ten," the proctor reminded her, and turned to her book.

"I know," Chris answered, and walked beside Jack out of the hall.

"Why did you tell her it was your roommate's dress?" Jack asked curiously, when they were walking under the February twilight of the campus trees. "Why didn't you just let her think it was your own?"

"Because Ray has never worn it." Chris reached out to catch a sprig of evergreen shrub along the walk, "and it wouldn't be fair to let the girls think it was mine, even at first, before she'd even had a chance to wear it." She crushed the sprig and sniffed the pungency released on her fingers.

Jack's fingers touched her arm. "I see," he said slowly. "I see, Chris." And Chris wondered why just the touch of his fingers on her arm had the power to send small currents of warmth through her whole body.

They walked on in silence for a time. "The car is down here." Jack indicated a side street, but his voice was absent-minded with the growth of a new idea. "But — do you need clothes so much you have to — borrow them, Chris?" he asked.

Chris paused and looked up at him, and his tallness was satisfying beside her. "Let's not talk about clothes, Jack," she said wryly. "I'd rather think about something else, what a beautiful evening it is, for instance, and maybe there will be a moon."

"Surre, there'll be a moon." Jack fell in with her mood. "Why shouldn't there be a moon, for — us!"

"Where'll we go, Chris?" he asked the usual question as the long car slipped away from the edge of Holden. "How about going over to Fairfield for dinner? I want to see how it feels to eat across the table from you." He smiled down at her.

Chris looked thoughtful. "Could we get back before ten?" she asked. "That's eight miles away."

Jack grinned. "Couldn't you climb in a window just once, honey?" He drew her closer into the circle of his arm. "Couldn't we be real bad and stay out until eleven?"

Chris felt the familiar little catch at her throat that his touch always gave her. "Oh, Jack," she whispered so softly that he could hardly hear it. "I don't care if we are late."

When they were settled at a small, lamplit table in Fairfield's little inn, Jack ordered the dinner, and sat back, his fair brows drawn down above his eyes. "Chris," he said slowly, "I want to ask you something."

Chris squeezed her hands, which were cold with fright in this new situation, together in her lap, and hoped that Jack could not see her nervousness. It was the first time in her life that she had eaten in a restaurant or dined with a man.

"Look, honey, I don't know how you'll take this —" he moved his spoon into an exact geometrical angle with his fork, "but, well — I want to do something for my girl."

Chris stared at him, her own uncertainty forgotten in surprise. "What do you mean Jack?" she asked in a puzzled voice.

"You know, Dad's got money," he said, and there was an unaccustomed hardness in his eyes as he added, "You did know that, didn't you, honey?" His tone was gently sardonic.

"Yes." Chris looked down at her plate. "I did know it."

"Okay then, sweet." He reached across the table and picked up her hand, and his tone was relieved that it was out between them at last, "Let's use some of that money and get my girl some clothes, something pretty fancy!"

Here it is, Chris thought clearly. This is what I've wanted! I can have anything I want from now on. He's in love with me.

But she sat, her shamed eyes unable to rise to his, her thoughts in confusion. What's the matter with me? she thought almost angrily. *Haven't I worked for this?*

Jack watched her. "I—I can get you whatever you want, honey," he said simply. "Dad wouldn't say a word."

But Chris sat on, her face troubled. For, strangely enough, in this moment for which she had been scheming, one thought was stronger than any other within her.

Jansiel!

The crippled woman seemed more present than Jack, more potent in her power than the strange, greedy, inner demanding that had been driving Chris through the weeks.

She shook her head at last. "No, Jack," she said slowly, almost in reluctance, and there were no pretenses between them. "I—I guess I've made a mistake. I—can't."

His voice grew cooler. "Wasn't this what you'd been after, Chris?" he asked. "Haven't I guessed right?"

Chris raised sick eyes. "You've guessed right," she admitted. "But I guessed wrong, Jack. I'm sorry. I—I just can't."

"Let's get out of here!" Jack threw a bill on the table and pushed back his chair. His face was flushed. "Come on, Chris."

In the car, he pulled her against him. "I ought to show you—" he whispered angrily. "You knew the game you were playing, Chris!"

Chris felt herself go weak with a sudden stab of fear and a quick pleasure in his love for her. "Don't, Jack—" she faltered.

He let her go and started the car with abrupt movements. "I've been crazy about you—" he said between set teeth, "and now, you tell me you've made a mistake!" He slammed a hard hand against the steering wheel.

He drove back to Holden in a cold and angry silence, speaking only the monosyllables necessary to a mocking courtesy. Chris huddled in her corner of the car, her thoughts all whirling, and watched him with sick eyes.

And when he had left her at the door of Marton Hall, she stood listening as the sound of his footsteps died away on the gravelled walk.

That was the end, she thought, and there lay within her the bleak knowledge that she had lost him. *That's that. That was goodbye.*

"Who does he think he is, anyway?" Ray stormed, when Chris, her nerves unable to bear the weight of her misery, had told her roommate all about it. "Does he just think he can buy anybody?"

Chris walked to the window and looked out on the campus, now touched with the first whispering green of spring. "I meant to do it, Ray," she said in a quiet voice. "I knew what that kind of a boy would expect. But I just — couldn't — when it came to a showdown."

Ray stood up and brushed her skirt down with a nervous hand. "Okay then," she said briskly. "That's that, then! The thing to do now is to forget all about the gentleman! Come on." She studied Chris with puzzled eyes. "Let's take our water pitcher and go get a quarter's worth of ice cream at the creamery! It'll do us good!"

Chris turned away from the window, her eyes bleak. "Sure!" she agreed with forced cheerfulness. "I've twelve cents! Can you manage the other thirteen, Ray?"

Ray grinned and rattled several coins in her hand. "I can do the whole quarter, my girl!" she said grandly. "I'm rich." Then, with an unaccustomed impulsiveness, she put an arm around the younger girl. "Oh Chris, come on, forget him!" she scolded gently. "He's not worth suffering over."

Chris turned her head away, but her hand groped for Ray's. "I know," she admitted in a choked voice. "I — I know he's not worth my crying over if that's all he loved me, but," and the tears in her throat rose, "but Ray, I do love him so!"

It was on a sleepy Sunday morning that she saw him again. Dressed in the Sunday black, she was marching, along with Ray, in the long double line of church-going girls. Overhead, the great trees, their leaves full now with the richness of late spring, threw down bright patterns of light on the somberly dressed column.

Chris, thinner now from hard work and the struggle to regain her equilibrium, was walking along absorbed in her own thoughts. Ray, beside her, was whispering busily to a girl in front of them, her lips nearly motionless and her eyes wary upon the proctor ahead.

I'm forgetting him, Chris thought with a sense of relief. *I'm getting over it all!* And her feet, acquiescent to the movement of other feet, beat out the peaceful rhythm to which she had set her thoughts through the emotional upheavals of the past weeks. A sweet, Sabbath calm lay over the little town and over her heart.

Hearing Ray gasp beside her, she looked up, her thoughts still gentle with their own quietness. And there was the long red car, passing the line, its wheels slow upon the gravelled street.

Chris' heart jerked out of its calm into the pain of unreasoning joy. Then, it turned cold and dull again, for, sitting beside Jack, her head drooping sleepily against the maroon leather of the seat, was Vivian MacComber!

"Oh, oh, how I hate that guy!" Ray chanted bitterly beside her. "I hope he drops dead."

Chris smiled sickly. "That wouldn't do any good," she whispered gently and tried to turn her eyes away from the car.

But her glance went back, as if pulled by wires, and her thoughts, rebelling against their discipline, leaped across the little space between the curb and the car.

And as she looked, Jack's eyes met hers in a long glance. He flushed, and Chris could see that his face, too, was thinner. *He has suffered*, she thought exultantly. *He's cared!*

Then the car had gone on its way, and the marching line of girls was still walking along, whispering and smiling, their

hair and dresses flecked by sunlight through the pattern of leaves.

Chris went to church, but not one word of the service got through to her.

It was a somnolent Sunday evening, when, after a weary afternoon in the refuge of her room, Chris decided to ask permission to go to Miss Ennie's. *Maybe I'll see him there*, she thought with honesty. *He must be still there*.

Ray had long ago gone to work off her impotent sympathy and her rage in a reluctantly permitted game of tennis. "If you let that guy see how he's hurt you, Chris," she had delivered an indignant ultimatum from the doorway as she was leaving, "I'll choke you with my bare hands! You hear me!"

Chris had laughed. "I hear you, Ray. And anyway, how could I get near enough to him to let him see that I'm hurt? Vivian has him now."

"Let her have him!" Ray had almost shouted, then, as her bright glance had raked with troubled concern over Chris' listless figure, she had added, "Forget him!" And the door had slammed eloquently behind her.

And now, Chris thought grimly, here she was headed for Miss Ennie's in the hope of seeing him. *I've no pride*, she told herself wearily, *to go hunting him this way!*

But as she walked up the steps of the David house, her heart frightened, she saw that it was dark. The door was locked to her hand and the bell, as she rang it, echoed with the sound of an empty house. The shadows of the Virginia creeper lay lacelike across the moonlit porch.

As she turned to go back to the dormitory, a tall figure came slowly up the walk.

"Chris!" It was Jack.

Something in Chris seemed to leap at his voice, then paused to resume its beating in a newer tempo. "Why, Jack—" She stopped at the top of the steps, and her voice sounded shrill and unsure to her own ears. "I — I didn't know you'd be here."

"I know." Jack came slowly up the steps, his face turned up to her. "Miss Ennie and Carl went to church, but I — I

thought I'd come sit here on the porch awhile. I wanted to — think —" And in the half-light, Chris could see his face, rebellious and deeply puzzled.

"I see." She stood while he came on up the steps, her hands folded childishly before her. There was within her a stillness, a waiting for his verdict, even as there had been that afternoon of their first meeting.

"Chris," Jack paused on the step below her, and one hand came up to touch her shoulder, "I've missed you, honey—" and his face was boyish and almost angry. "I've missed you!"

And Chris' eyes waited, quiet for his decision.

Suddenly, he reached up and pulled her into his arms, enveloped her and held her close. He buried his face against her neck. "Oh, Chris!" His voice held a note almost of desperation. "I've got to have you! I want you, no matter what anyone says. Will—will you marry me, Chris?"

Chris' hand crept slowly and shakingly up to stroke the humbled blonde head against her shoulder. "I love you so, Jack," was her only answer.

But she knew, deep within herself, and with a weary and shameful certainty, that had his desires of her been otherwise again tonight — her answer would have been the same.



20

SPRING in Holden, Chris decided as she walked toward Miss Ennie's, seemed almost indecent to one brought up amid the restrained flowerings of the prairie country. The spilling glory of the climbing rose that tumbled down the fence beside the brick walk, the whisperings of the great old trees, as they talked overhead of the secrets in their hearts, the saturnalia of bloom and perfume that was every passing yard, combined into an extravagance of beauty. It was, she thought fancifully, like a gypsy dancing with her petticoats showing!

In a way, she thought as she reached for one of the roses, and, picking it, pinned its scarlet brilliance against her short curls, very much like the way of life that Jack was offering her. It was so much in contrast to what she'd had all her life, rich and dazzling fullness after long want! She glanced down at the brilliant clearness of Jack's diamond on her hand as it lay against the dark weave of her worn skirt. "Wear it, sweet!" It had been almost a month since he had said

it so seriously, out of his usual bantering lovemaking. "Wear my ring! You're my girl, Chris, you know that."

"But Jack—" She had turned and turned the beautiful thing on her finger and had wondered why she felt so quiet, so hesitant in this high moment. "Jack—maybe—"

"Look, Chris." Jack's hands had been hard on her shoulders. "You know I love you! I'm going to marry you, to have you, honey, no matter what anyone says!"

"That's it—Jack—" Her voice had hesitated in its troubled acknowledgment, "There's so much 'no matter what' about it all!"

He had brushed aside her doubts with kisses and teasing laughter, and her own love for him had been his strongest ally.

But even Jack did not know how great was the "in spite of" between them, she thought now, and the high lift of her heart was a little dimmed. To his, "Tell me about your folks, your home, and all. I want to know all about you!" she had always had an evasion, a partial answer, ready for his questions. *Not yet, not yet*, something seemed to counsel. *Wait a while before you tell him. What! Tell him about the shanty and Paw, and poor Jansie and stupid Willie!*

She turned into the walkway that led to the wide steps of the David house, and paused for an instant, looking up at the shabby old house. Somehow as she stood before it, she felt in it some quality of peace, some security for which she had, half consciously, been groping. In some way, and her heart reached for the reason with a stubborn will to know, the old house seemed to be the center of the morning. About it lay an aura of almost tangible peace and smiling kindness.

And the strange thing about it, Chris thought as she studied its peeling graciousness, was that it did not come from money! For it had not taken her long, coming here day after day to be a part of the quiet household, to realize that Miss Ennie was very poor. The beautifully served and painfully scant meals, the neatly darned linens and well-turned clothes, were not an indication of a graceful parsimoniousness as she had thought at first, but were a grim concession to unequivocal

reality. Behind the facade of gentlewomanly dignity and sparse charm, lay a poverty almost as drastic as the Sanders' own! Even Carl, behind his casual, almost lazy poise, was working his way through the law school at the University.

And yet, she thought wonderingly, as she stood paying puzzled and almost reluctant tribute to the crumbling magnificence of the place, there was certainly something about these Davids! She gazed at the lacy pattern thrown on the east wall by the sunlight through the ancient Virginia creeper, and the mystery of the beauty of the shabby house and the mystery of the charm and the unobtrusive strength of the David family, were one in her mind.

She was reluctant to leave the serenity of the morning for the darkened hallway within, so she walked slowly up the worn steps and sat down on the warm wood of the top one. She was a little tired and somewhat dispirited from the thoughts that lay within her.

The front door opened behind her and she looked back, expecting to see Miss Ennie's little figure.

But it was Carl.

"Why, Carl!" Chris' voice was surprised. He had been home only the week-end before, and here he was again, on a Friday morning. "Is anything—is everything all right?"

Carl nodded and, closing the heavy door silently behind him, came to sit on the step beside her. "Everything's all right," he answered, and his eyes were smiling. "Aunt Ennie is gone to town, and Goldie's in the kitchen. I came with Jack." Then at Chris' look, he added quickly. "He's at the Inn. Said he couldn't impose on Aunt Ennie so much, though she said it wasn't. Anyway, I came for the ride."

"Is Jack here?" Chris asked foolishly, out of the bewilderment of delight. "I didn't know he was coming." And there rushed through her the weakness that the mention of Jack's name always brought.

Carl smiled, and Chris noticed, out of the selfishness of her own happiness, that he looked tired. He leaned back against the pillar at the edge of the porch, and the shadow of the Virginia creeper was across his face and dark hair.

He was more casually dressed this morning than Chris had seen him before, in faded trousers and a worn sport shirt, open at the throat. "I don't think he meant to come again so soon," he admitted in answer to Chris' exclamation. "He told me two days ago that he was behind on his work and had to catch up this week-end, but—" his eyes were gently teasing, "I guess he couldn't help it! He just came!"

Chris laughed wryly. "I don't believe he is that helpless," she answered. "I wonder why he did come."

Carl looked at her. "He came to see you," he said quietly, and his eyes were serious. "I don't believe you realize how—how helplessly in love with you he is, Chris." His voice was slow. "I've never seen him like this before."

Chris looked down at her hands in her lap. "Not even about Vivian MacComber?" The words were light, but her eyes were watching Carl from under her lashes.

He glanced quickly at her. "No, not even about Vivian," he answered her hidden meaning rather than her words, "though I did think they had a great deal in common."

In the silence that followed his words, Chris sat wishing that she hadn't mentioned Vivian. It had sounded petty, and a little mean.

"You look lovely with that red rose against your dark hair, Chris," Carl seemed to sense her shame. "You should always wear a red rose in your hair!"

Chris looked up to smile, and their eyes held, the dark ones and the hazel-green ones. *Why, why*, Chris' thoughts were queerly stumbling, *why, I didn't know—Carl—*

But a breeze lifted the corner of a curl, and overhead, a mockingbird bubbled forth his ecstasy. The sunlight lay warm and sweet about them as they sat smiling at each other in its light, and summer was just tomorrow.

But the moment passed.

Chris waited, and finally broke the silence herself. "Carl," she said suddenly, "why does your Aunt Ennie have me work for her when she can't afford it?"

Carl flicked a finger at a caterpillar that was laboring across the boards of the porch. "I won't ask you how your thoughts

got around to that, Chris," he said facetiously. "I doubt if you could tell me yourself. But I will say," he grinned at her, "that a woman's thoughts must be rare and wonderful things!"

"Tell me," Chris commanded. "I want to know."

"Well." Carl frowned in thought. "I guess she wants to do a little something for the school, maybe. Help a brilliant girl stay here who might not be able to otherwise. Our grandfather helped to found Holden."

"Yes, I know." Chris' voice was still demanding. "But *I* know what it is to be poor, Carl," and she looked defiantly across at the young man. "Oh, I don't mean nice poor. I mean awful poor! She oughtn't to do it, sacrifice to keep someone working here for her, year after year."

Carl sat quiet for a moment, then asked, without looking at her, "Now it's my turn to ask a question. Do you mind?"

Chris shrugged. "Go ahead."

"Has this year meant anything to you?" he asked, and his eyes came around to face her. "I mean, has Aunt Ennie given you anything, Chris?"

Chris looked back at him, and her eyes were without pretenses. "I can't tell you what it has meant, Carl!" she said honestly. "Just being—well—exposed to Miss Ennie and the way she does things and how she is, without even knowing it herself, has been more than anything!" She stared at him, feeling helpless to put her feelings into words.

But Carl seemed to understand. "Then it has been worth Aunt Ennie's sacrifice," he pointed out. "For, you see, that's what Aunt Ennie has wanted to do. She has a sort of agreement with Dean Evans about it. He is to send her a girl each fall who not only needs the money—," he hesitated, then forced himself to go on, "but who needs to be taught—other things—" He looked at her anxiously, afraid of her resentment. "Do you see what I mean, Chris?"

"I think I do," Chris admitted slowly, and there was no anger in her, only understanding. "I—I hope I haven't—disappointed her."

Carl shook his head. "No, you've been fine. Some of the others could take it and some—well—couldn't. The ones who could, have thought a lot of her."

There was a step on the walk, and they both looked up. Then their eyes met in amused understanding. For Miss Ennie was coming up the walk, her steps dainty on the worn way, with an old-fashioned square purse on one arm, and her market basket on the other.

The shadow of the house lay long to the street when Chris came down the steps again, her day's work done. It had been a busy day. Friday always was, and she was tired with a satisfying sort of tiredness that came from the sense of a good work accomplished. There'd been hours in which to study today, sandwiched in between the duties for Miss Ennie, and the Educational Psychology book under her arm was firmly closed around a thick batch of notes in her careful handwriting. Miss Ennie had looked over her shoulder as she had sat at the softly gleaming old desk in the dining room, to nod happily. "You write well, Chris," she had complimented in her bell-like voice. "I always say a lady should have a neat, ladylike handwriting."

And Chris had smiled over her shoulder with a gentle abstraction. For even as she had been working at the notes, she had been wondering just why, when she had no intention of applying for a certificate or of coming back next year, she was so careful to do them! Her grades, fine as they had been — she had managed the freshman honor roll for the whole year up to this last semester — wouldn't make the slightest difference in the world when she was married to Jack.

Jack wouldn't care, she thought with a puzzled shifting of values, if I failed every subject. In fact he'd think it was cute! And all the effort, the slow building, of the years, seemed, in some subtle way, too slow, too effortful, and too dull!

There was a shout from the street, and she looked up to see Jack's car pulling up to the curb. "Hi beautiful!" he yelled, and his gay face was tender. "How's about a little

ride before you rush to the dorm to dress for the date we are going to have tonight?"

Chris laughed, and there was in her tone all the warm rush of joyous feeling that went through her in response to his gaiety, his greedy vitality for living. "It's just an hour until dinnertime at school." She came up to the car door and stood smiling at him. "Maybe I'd better not try to go riding, Jack. I'll see you at the date hour." She screwed up her face at him and stuck out her tongue. "Even if you did just assume a date without consulting me!"

Jack grinned impudently. "Well, you're my woman, aren't you, femme?" He leaned over and opened the door and invited her in with a gesture. "I've got plans for this evening, my girl, big plans. Get in and we'll discuss!"

Chris got into the car beside him, and leaned back. "Here I am," she announced as the gears clashed noisily and the car moved up the street. "Now, discuss." Then she added, sitting up and looking at him, "But won't you get behind on your work, Jack?" she asked in a troubled voice, "coming here again this week-end?"

Jack screwed his face into a grimace. "Don't mention the old work, baby! What's the use of studying law when I don't want to be a lawyer, anyway? And besides," he added. "I had to see you! Did you think about me, Chris?" he asked.

Chris nodded, and her eyes were bright with admitted love. "I thought about you almost every minute, Jack," she said seriously, "more than I should have, I think!"

"So you see," Jack looked pleased, "I couldn't do anything else except come! And Chris," his face grew a little anxious, "my folks are driving down tonight to meet you."

"What?" Chris turned and stared at him with the coldness of amazement going over her. "Did you say they were coming down here *tonight*, to meet *me*?"

Jack nodded. "Yep. That's right. They came down to see me this week-end and said they wanted to meet my girl. Dad had some business to attend to in Austin this afternoon, but they said they'd be here in time for dinner." He did not look at her.

Chris sat, stunned. "But, Jack—" she hesitated, knowing before she said them how foolish the words would sound, "Why didn't you give me more — time—?"

"I want to get married as soon as we can," Jack went on as if she had not spoken, "and they know it, Chris, so they drove down to meet you. Did you hear me, Chris?" his voice demanded. "I want to get married soon." And there was excitement in his voice.

I'm glad I have my new things to wear! Chris thought wildly, but aloud she said quietly, "I'd better get back to the school, Jack, so I can get ready."

Chris looked admiringly down at the new patent leather bag as it bumped gently against the brightness of the new green dress. It was so nice to have some clothes, at last! She reached a pleased finger to the felt of her new green cloche, and felt at peace with the world. And hungry. It was almost an hour past the school dinner time, and not even the prospect of Jack's parents could overcome the empty feeling within Chris.

The last glimmer of silvery evening lay over the trees and the quiet houses along the street. It would soon be night, and as she looked about her at the serenity of it all, Chris was glad that she'd chosen to meet them at Miss Ennie's instead of the hectic after-supper atmosphere of the dormitory.

As she came within sight of Miss Ennie's front door, she paused and her eyes darted to the curb. But they hadn't come yet, and she drew a sigh of relief, then turned into the walkway that led to the porch.

The old hallway was dusky with evening as she opened the door. From somewhere in the back of the house, she could hear Goldie's high complaining, and Carl's lower tones. *Goldie's put out again*, Chris thought with amusement. She felt benevolent toward everyone tonight.

Long light fell across the hall rug, as the dining room door opened and Carl stood silhouetted against the brightness. "That you, Chris?" he asked. "You're early."

"Yes." Chris moved toward him. "I thought I'd better get down here and practice getting up my nerve! I'm scared of them, Carl!"

Carl walked across the dark hall and switched on a light, then turned to smile at her. "Why?" he asked.

But for some reason his smile faded slowly, and Chris found herself wondering with a vague irritation, what was wrong.

She stood, carefully balancing the patent leather bag. "Oh, I don't know," she said uncertainly. "I guess I just don't know exactly what to expect."

Carl frowned thoughtfully. "I see," he answered, then added, with seeming irrelevance, "All dressed-up tonight, aren't you, Chris?"

Chris pirouetted happily. "These are my brand new clothes," she told him and her voice was self-pleased. "I've been saving for six months to buy myself one pretty outfit! I even saved the Ladies' Aid Christmas gift money."

There was some obscure relief in his voice when he answered, "So you saved up to get them," he said, and there was a faint apology in his tone. "It was nice you had them ready to wear to meet Jack's people."

"Isn't it!" Chris agreed. "I certainly want to look my best."

Carl stood looking at her for a long moment, then cleared his throat. "Where did you get the pearls?" he asked.

"Oh, those?" Chris walked to the hall mirror and surveyed her reflection. "Those are Ray's. They aren't real, as she paid only a dollar for them, but she said they looked nice with my dress."

"You—well—you don't exactly need them though," Carl's eyes were anxious on hers in the mirror. "They sort of spoil the line of your neck, with that dress."

"You mean," Chris peered at her imaged outline, then at Carl's reflected eyes, "You mean," she said crossly, "that you don't like the way I look, Carl?"

Carl came up behind her, as she watched him in the mirror. "Look Chris," He turned her by the shoulders, "you're the most beautiful thing on earth to me. See?" His voice was husky.

"But I look wrong somehow." Chris' voice investigated the invasion. "I can tell you think that, Carl. What's wrong with my clothes?"

"Nothing." Carl answered grimly.

"That isn't true!" Chris' felt tears of frustration pressing into her nose. "Tell me!" she demanded.

For answer, Carl pulled her into his arms. "All right, I'll tell you!" He shook her gently. "No, don't say anything! Just listen." His tone hardened. "Jack's mother is a social-climbing, old granite-face, and she'll rip that outfit to pieces."

Chris pulled out of his arms and sat down on the bottom step of the stairway. "Then, what'll I *do*?" she demanded angrily. "Here I save and save and save to get some decent clothes, and now you tell me they look awful!" And mixed up with her distress was an irritated inner acknowledgment of the unexpected sweetness of his concern for her.

"Well." Carl looked down at her, his dark, thin face troubled. "First, why wear a hat? With your hair," he lifted off the cheap cloche with gentle fingers, "you ought never to wear a candle-snuffer like that! And don't carry that shiny bag, either." He laid the prized bag beside the hat on a table, and taking Chris' hands, pulled her to her feet. "And take off the lipstick," he went on. "On you, it looks cheap."

Chris glared at him and, marching to the mirror, scrubbed at her mouth.

"Now the pearls." Carl's voice was firm. "And that bunch of silk flowers isn't needed on your shoulder. Jack may bring you some real ones."

With shaking fingers, Chris took off the pearls and laid them on the hat, then jerked at the flowers. They came off with a ripping of threads. "I hope you're satisfied," she said between her teeth. She looked at her strangely bared reflection and felt suddenly defenseless.

The doorbell rang, and they stared at each other as Goldie's slow steps approached from the kitchen. "I doan' know why *I* have-ta be answering that there bell," the old Negress grumbled as she swept past them with a malevolent look. "Me being busy way past my time to go home!"

Carl swept the little collection of Chris' finery into the table drawer, then, taking her arm, he pulled her into the drawing room. "Just be yourself, Chris," he whispered hurriedly. "Don't let her scare you!" And then he added in a voice so low that she was not sure she had heard it, "Darling!"

Carl was right, Chris decided as she acknowledged Jack's anxiously jovial introductions. Mrs. Duncan was certainly overwhelming! Inches shorter than Chris' slender tallness, nevertheless she gave an air of immense dignity. She bent her beautifully groomed head in greeting to Chris and studied her through the first lorgnette that the girl had ever seen. "How do you do, my dear?" she asked in a tone that implied hope for the worst. "Jack has said so much about you!"

Chris smiled uncertainly and turned to Jack's father. Mr. Duncan looked down at her with blue eyes that were an icily shrewd version of Jack's laughing ones. "And so this is Jack's girl." His tone was more cordial than his wife's, though it, too, held a definite note of reserved judgment. "We've been wanting to meet you."

Before Chris could do more than smile, Carl's voice broke in, "Aunt Ennie will be down in just a moment, Mrs. Duncan," he said with casual courtesy. "She asked Chris and me to make you comfortable." His tone put Chris on a David family basis.

Mrs. Duncan warmed perceptibly. "Dear Miss David!" She beamed upon Carl. "I hardly know her, but I'm sure we have so much in common. Such a lovely room," she murmured, and her eyes calculated the faded elegance with a mixture of contempt and reluctant respect.

Carl's eyes twinkled. "I'm sure you will have a great deal in common, Mrs. Duncan," he said with careful courtesy. "Won't you sit down?"

Jack looked at Carl with a sharp glance, but his face was inscrutable.

Chris watched them settle on the fragile chairs, and eased herself nervously to the edge of the love seat by the fireplace. She felt stiff and awkward, and every time Mrs. Duncan

looked at her, she felt an almost physical impact of dislike. Carl stood by the mantel, his tall frame easy and poised. Jack, hesitating for a moment with a glance toward his mother, came ostentatiously over to sit beside Chris. "My girl looks mighty sweet tonight," he announced, and his voice was sudden and loud in the quietness of the room.

Carl smiled, but no one spoke. Chris looked uncertainly at Jack.

And in the seemingly endless silence that followed Jack's words, Miss Ennie appeared in the doorway.

As Chris watched, wonderingly, Miss Ennie slowly and imperceptibly, but with the firm sureness of the expert, drew the reins of the situation into her own fragile hands. "Good evening." She smiled about at them, and then going to each of the Duncans, she bestowed the gracious slenderness of a small hand upon them. Of the three visitors, it was Jack who was most at ease in the presence of the strangely dominating little figure.

Carl smiled at Chris across the top of the mantel, and his face was sharing something with her. Chris smiled back in response, not understanding exactly, but grateful for the reassurance.

When presently, they were all in the hall saying the too-elaborate good-byes of an awkward situation, getting ready to go out to the gleamingly expensive car that was waiting by the curb, Miss Ennie laid a thin hand on Chris' arm. "Will you excuse Chris for a minute?" She smiled at the others. "I have something to—er—tell her."

And in the privacy of her own bedroom, she turned brightly fierce eyes upon Chris. "Here, Chris." She reached for a soft gold kid purse on her dressing table. "You carry this tonight. It'll look well with that green, and it'll occupy your hands."

Chris felt sudden tears pushing at the back of her throat, and behind her eyelids, as she looked down at the dim gold thing in her hand. "It's simply lovely, Miss Ennie." She choked a little as she opened the purse. Tucked inside was a thin lace handkerchief and a ten-dollar bill. "Oh! I can't take this, Miss Ennie, honestly I can't!"

It must be her grocery money, she thought worriedly. That's all she has left this month!

"Nonsense!" Miss Ennie's hand was firm upon her shoulder in a reassuring pat. "Don't be foolish. Of course I wouldn't let you go out with those people without some money with you! You need the feel of it in your pocket!"

Chris raised her head in surprise at some note in Miss Ennie's voice that she did not understand. Miss Ennie saw the surprise. "Humph! Don't let that Duncan woman scare you," she said briskly. Then leaning closer to the girl, her faded blue eyes grew bright with the delight of gossip. "She's nobody so much, Chris, and don't you forget it. She was one of those Blakes girls. She worked as a waitress in her father's little oil-field cafe until she married Duncan!"

Chris looked at the little figure with a new respect. *Well!* she thought without much originality, *You never know!*

Carl looked up to smile as Chris came slowly down the curving stairway. And in that instant of meeting his eyes above the heads of the others, she knew, with a grateful certainty, that the ten dollars in the little purse was not Miss Ennie's grocery money!

"For heaven's sake." Mrs. Duncan's contemptuous glance went over the sleepy inactivity of the Holden town square. "Where on earth will we go to get food in this place!"

Jack grinned back at his mother from his seat beside the chauffeur. "It's a pretty dead little burg, all right," he agreed happily. "But what do you expect of a town that has nothing in it but a two-bit church school?"

Mr. Duncan sighed gustily and bit off the end of a thin, black cigar. "I'd be satisfied to eat anywhere," he remarked, "if I could eat just what I'd like for a change." He grinned at Chris and leaned back in the seat. His heavy shoulder pressed against hers.

She looked up to find Mrs. Duncan's eyes missing nothing. "Jack says you come from Collins, Miss Sanders." Mrs. Duncan's words were contemptuous of preliminaries. "Of course,

you know the Beverlys? Such dear friends of ours! They have a little place near Collins, I believe."

Chris shook her head. "No, I don't know them," she admitted quietly. "Of course I've heard of them." For everyone in that part of Texas *had* heard of the Beverly tribe, cattle, oil, and all. They spent scant time on the "little" place, a ranch of many sections, near Collins, but found more kindred souls in New York and abroad.

Mrs. Duncan raised surprised eyebrows. "I can't understand your not having met them sometime," she said sweetly. "Practically everyone knows Maude and Jim Beverly!"

"Cut it out, Mom!" Jack's voice was harsh. "Chris' folks are just people. They'd never have any reason to run around with that bunch—"

Mrs. Duncan looked at him. "They're our *friends*, Jack!" she reminded him in a reproachful tone, "and I was only trying to find a common bond with the—er—girl that my son is planning to marry!"

"Yeah?" Jack's tone was deliberately mocking, and Chris winced at the look he gave his mother.

She looked out through the car window, and tried to regain the sense of assurance that had been hers as she had talked to Miss Ennie. —*don't let that Duncan woman scare you, Chris. She's nobody so much!*

"The Sanders—adopted me," she explained slowly, compelled by the demand in Mrs. Duncan's tone, "when I was a baby. My—mother died—"

"I see." Mrs. Duncan's tone was less cold. "And this family who adopted you, the Sanders,—they still live there in Collins?"

"Yes." Chris thought of the shanty and the lane to town. "They still live there."

Mrs. Duncan's evident intention to go on with the questioning was interrupted by the stopping of the car. At Jack's instruction, the chauffeur had pulled to the curb before the town's best hotel. "There's a pretty good little coffee shop in here," Jack announced firmly, "and I say—let's eat!"

Quick relief flew through Chris. But as she stepped down with Jack's hand on her arm, she glanced back at Mr. Duncan over her shoulder. His eyes were knowing upon her, and she knew that the questioning was not over, that it had, in fact, just begun!

As dinner progressed, Chris listened to the aimless talk around the lamplit table, and tried to plan.

It was evident that Jack's mother was against her, and Chris could see that Jack knew it too. *I don't care!* she thought defensively. *Jack is so much in love with me that she can't break it up. She'll have to accept me.* But in the meantime, she must be careful not to give Mrs. Duncan anything tangible to use against her.

And as for Mr. Duncan, she was uncertain. He liked her, at least her looks. Of that she was certain, but, somehow, there was deep within her another certainty about him. It was that, unlike Mrs. Duncan, he would not be affected in his decisions by any personal feeling whatsoever, about a person. He might like you, and yet, if you happened to be in the way when he decided upon a course of action, it would not be well for you! No, she couldn't count on Mr. Duncan!

But I can count on Jack, she thought as she looked up from her plate to catch his glance, *Jack wants me! And there is something stronger between us than they can take away. I believe,* she thought quietly, *that Jack would stop at nothing to get me.* And the thought was warmly comforting within her. Yes, there was Jack!

His eyes smiled at her across the table. "Chris is one of these smart girls, Mom," he said proudly. "Reads a lot of books and things like that!"

Chris laughed. "Well, I like Holden," she explained.

Mrs. Duncan looked surprised. "Really? Poor Vivian insists that it is practically a prison! But of course—" and the sentence hung in the air above the table.

"Well." Mr. Duncan looked across the table with narrowed eyes, and Chris had a queer feeling that his next words would settle everything. "I'm sure that Chris would like to get

away from Holden, even if she does like it." He paused, and Chris, looking at Mrs. Duncan's face, knew that judgment was being passed. "We'll take her to New York, and Paris, and get her some good clothes and fix her up."

He paused, and in the silence, his eyes were hard upon his wife. Mrs. Duncan's face was still, but Chris felt that she was shrinking back, almost as if from a blow. And in that instant, Chris felt a stab of pity for the other woman. But Jack's eyes were gleaming with delight.

"Of course," the heavy voice went on, and the hard eyes were shrewd upon Chris, "It isn't such a bad thing that Chris is adopted! There won't be so many demands upon her from family ties, emotionalism and all that." He paused again, and out of a new bewilderment Chris tried to grasp at his meanings. "Families can be a real problem, especially for a pretty girl like Chris. And since she hasn't any family of her own,—eh—Chris?"

And Chris got it.

Under all those casual sounding words, Mr. Duncan was delivering an ultimatum—first to his wife—*We will accept this girl, make her over, and build her up for Jack*—then to Chris herself—*We'll let you marry Jack, money and all, if you'll be all ours. We will just forget about the Sanders family.*

"It's been done." Mr. Duncan's words defended the unspoken implications, and then, again, "Eh, Chris?"

Chris knew that it was up to her.

Jansie won't care, she thought defensively. *She wants me to be happy! I can send them money, and presents, and things.*

But her heart was strangely sick as she nodded. "That sounds wonderful to me, Mr. Duncan," she answered, and they both knew that a bargain had been struck.

The meal went on, and presently, Mrs. Duncan insisted that the waiter be called, that she might complain about the food. It was her gesture of defiance.

"Paper, paper!"

Mr. Duncan looked up from his dessert with the satisfied air of a man who has concluded a good deal. "Here, boy!"

Chris sat, watching him spread the paper on the table before his plate. She felt sick and strange, and had no wish to eat. Jack's eyes were hot with pleasure, and he was eating enthusiastically, but Mrs. Duncan sat, her face bleak, idling the food upon her plate.

What have I done? Chris thought wonderingly, and then, as the memory of these last weeks, her wilfulness to have the things that she wanted, came back to her, she straightened in her chair. *I don't care*, she thought defiantly, *I don't care! I want some of the things other girls have, clothes and money, and prestige! Why should Vivian MacComber have everything! Just because I happened to be born in the Sanders house that night—doesn't really make them my people. It isn't as if they were my own flesh and blood — her thoughts went on.*

But the memory of Jansie's face was, somehow, troubling in her heart.

"Say!" Mr. Duncan thrust out a lip and squirmed his cigar into a better position for speaking, and his eyes, above the paper, commanded them all. "Listen to this." And his tone took them in as already a family group. "A gang robbed the bank at Dotyville last night. Killed the cashier and a couple of bystanders."

Mrs. Duncan looked dully across the table, and Jack, quick to respond after getting his own way, looked interested. Chris listened to the harsh voice, reading aloud, but her own thoughts were turning in troubled movement.

"But they got them." Mr. Duncan's eyes were on his paper, and he went on with the singsong tone of a news account. "Three of the robbers were killed, two instantly, and the other dying after an hour. The third man lived long enough to identify the others as Sheb and Wes Jackson, brothers, and to give his own name as—" and suddenly Chris was aware that the cold eyes were upon her across the table, "'As Joe Sanders, of Collins.'"

There was a long silence, as she sat, staring at the reader. *Joe, Joe*, her thoughts pounded dully. "*You'd better stay*

away from them Jackson boys, Joe," Jansie's voice was strong within her, "They'll get you into trouble—"

She became aware that the Duncans were waiting, waiting for her to deny it, to declare her allegiance to their own way.

I'll get her another name, Mr. Duncan was thinking, money can do it—

This is tough. Jack's eyes were tender upon her, but we'll get her away from it—

And there was in Mrs. Duncan's eyes only a defeated satisfaction at seeing her suffer.

Chris looked about her, and her glance became deliberate.

Reaching over, she took the paper out of Mr. Duncan's hand. She looked at the picture at the top of the page. *Joe, lying there on a pavement, dying, and surrounded by hating people.*

She stood up.

"Chris—" Jack's voice was distressed. "Sit down, darling—"

Chris turned to look at him, and she smiled, stiffly. Slowly, she slipped off the beautiful ring and laid it on the table, then looked past him at Mr. Duncan, then, last of all, at Jack's mother. "I'm sorry," she said clearly.

Several diners looked up.

"I'm awfully sorry," Chris went on. "But I — I can't stay. You see," She took a deep breath. "That man is my brother. I've got to go home!"

She was halfway back to the school before she heard hurrying footsteps behind her.

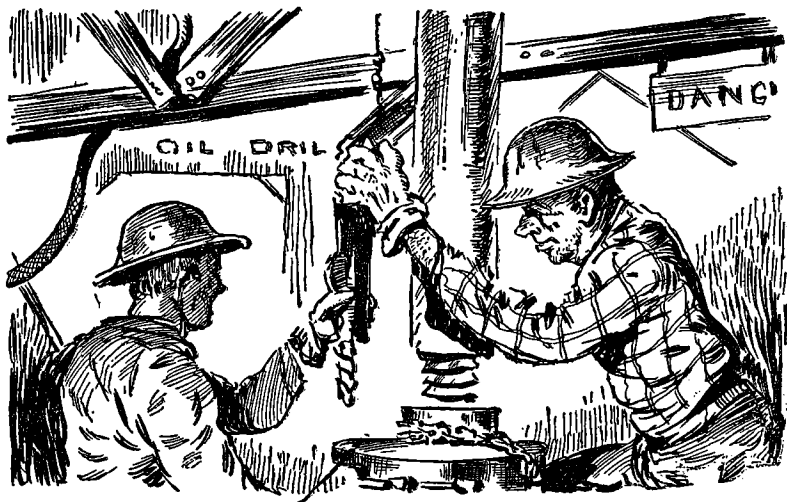
It's Jack! Her heart leaped exultantly, Coming after me, to tell me that he loves me, no matter what!

"Chris!" It was not Jack. It was Carl. "Chris! I saw the paper, and I've been hunting you in every restaurant in town! Don't be so hurt, darling—don't!"

Chris smiled up at him, and there were no tears within her, "Thank you for coming, Carl."

Carl took her arm, and his eyes were sick with pain for her. "Aunt Ennie says to come right to her. We'll get you off for home."

And through the blur of her heartache and shock, Chris realized dimly that his hand upon her arm was strangely comforting.



21

IT was spring again in Collins, too. Jansie eased the edge of her hoe between the waxy-green shoots of the onions, and felt the warmth of the sunshine upon her lame back. The scent of moist loam came sweetly from the rich soil of the garden, and the air upon the prairie was clear and clean. Even the chickens seemed to feel the stirring push of new life as they hustled about in the endless food-quest of their days. Spring, Jansie decided cheerfully, seemed to flap right out of the folds of her freshly washed sheets on the line!

She sighed a little with the satisfying weariness of physical effort, and straightened up to look about her. All across the rolling world about the shanty, from the white neatness of the oyster-shell road that had replaced the rutted old lane to town, out to the immovable serenity of the low hills on the horizon, spring was stroking coaxing fingers.

There'd been times this winter, the crippled woman thought with a quietness of growing acceptance, when she'd been sure her heart was as frozen as the forbidding reaches

of the frozen prairie itself. After Charles had left in early December, going back to his school, and then, on to the Orient, she had felt the lump within her that was her heart, as a tangible misery of physical pain. Sometimes, in the long night, with only R.P.'s snore and Willie's restless muttering to keep her company, she'd been sure that she'd die of the loneliness that lay within her. But people didn't die of loving someone too much, no matter how foolish such a love had been in the first place. You just went right on living, being ugly and unsatisfactory, even to yourself, and the person you loved went on his way, never knowing.

Not that she'd wanted him to know! She admitted it to herself as she bent once more to her task. That would have been the crowning humiliation, to have him know that a wizened, hunchbacked, little, old fool was in love with him! Her lip curled in self-contempt at the thought, and the hoe struck sparks from a buried rock in the onion patch. She was glad that no one could ever know those strangely private inner thoughts of her days. *I'd sound like one of Mamma's old love novels*, she thought with an amused quirk of self-analysis, *if anybody could read me!*

At the thought of Annie's novels, her thoughts shifted to the activity that had made the winter months endurable. *I have had the books*, she admitted to herself. *The books have helped.*

For, haltingly at first and with much spelling-out of words and skipping of hard ones, then, as she had slowly gained skill, with more sureness, she had begun to read. Everything that she had been able to lay her long brown hands on had been grist for the grinding mill of her hungry mind, from Annie's old love novels, yellowed and moldy from their long forgottenness in a dark corner of the smithy, to a systematic but voracious perusal of the list of books that Charles had made for her. "You'll never read them, Jansie," he had insisted when the weekly lessons had progressed to the stage of practice reading outside the primer, "if I leave this town without making some arrangement for you to get books!"

"I've got no money to be spending on books. You know that." Jansie had kept her eyes on the endless knitting that was now so essential with Chris in college. "And besides, I'm too old to be starting much reading. I can manage Chris' letters now, and that's enough, I reckon. About all I can expect."

"It's not enough." Charles' eyes had been firm. "I'm going to arrange for a library card for you before I leave this town. That won't cost you anything."

"I know; you told me that last week," Jansie had retorted out of a deep alarm at the prospect of facing the elegant intellectuality of Miss Pheeters, the librarian. "But how can I go down there, bold as brass, and ask them to lend me books? Everybody will wonder how come Jansie Sanders is getting so biggety!"

"Let 'em!" Charles had grinned at her. "Who cares? You'll have something to read, and believe me, Jansie, you don't know how much it will mean to you."

Then, before he had left, he had given her a soft-leathered, clearly printed, little Bible. "You read this every day, Jansie," he had instructed, his grey eyes gentle. "Skip the hard words and go at it! You'll be surprised at how many of the ideas in there you are already practicing."

Yes, she'd had books. And they'd been a comfort in more ways than one, but they'd hurt, too, some of them. Books had begun to roll back the horizons of her mind to reaches that were straining. And some of the words she had read had been almost too wonderful for the bearing! Especially in the Bible Charles had given her. She'd read it faithfully all winter, plodding painfully through page after puzzling page of names and generations, of begats and mysterious prophecy. But, now and then, some phrase or sentence, some verse, had lifted straight out of the text and into her heart.

This morning, for instance, she'd been up earlier than usual. Sometimes she got to thinking and couldn't sleep very well, and last night had been that kind of a time. It had been too early to wake Paw and Willie when she had finally given up the struggle to sleep, so she had put the teakettle on for coffee

and had seated herself at the kitchen table to read awhile before breakfast.

One by one, she had wrenched the words out of the text, hard words, to read and to understand. And then — suddenly, like the faces of friends in a foreign country, there they were! The very words that Charles had said, that first time she had ever seen him, out there on the knoll. “The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness—”

Overwhelmed by the joyous surprise of it, she had sat still, there at the kitchen table, reading the words over and over, hearing, as she read, Charles’ voice, and seeing his face as he had said the words that day, facing the blue hills at the edge of the prairie.

They were like bells in her heart.

A noise from the road in front of the shanty drew her eyes and attention away from the circle of her own concentration. A long wagon, pulled by the endlessly patient mules of the oil fields, was going by, headed for the rig rising across the road. A shadow fell across Jansie’s thoughts, and she watched the great timbers of the load go by with something like impatience within her.

When the increasingly familiar equipage had crunched its way into the pasture across from the shanty, over a makeshift gate of pushed-down barbed wire, Jansie bent again to her hoeing, and her face was quiet with her thoughts.

She’d been planting onions that day, two weeks ago, when R. P. had come out to her from the shanty. Jansie, on her knees to press the soil about the dry bulbs, had sensed his presence at the edge of the garden patch. Then, when the shadow of his body had fallen across her work, she had looked up with a sudden sense of apprehension, as if some warning bell of instinct within her had sounded its note. And when she had straightened up to look at him, his rheumy eyes had been smug. “They’re agoing to drill on our land!” he had said proudly, as if the fact were some great achievement of

his own. "Man just left here. Told me they was going to drill for oil."

Jansie had laid down her handful of onion-sets, and had brushed off her long hands with a troubled gesture. "What do they want to come drilling on our land for?" she had asked the old man. "There's no oil here, Paw."

R. P. had looked surprised at her tone. "Why, I don't know," he'd said uncertainly. "There may be. Look at Sam Smart over on Duck Creek. They got a gusher on his place — thousand dollars a month coming in just like that," and he'd snapped his fingers with a dramatic gesture.

But Jansie had bent again to her work, with a troubled sense of repugnance strong within her. "There's no oil here," she'd insisted stubbornly. "And who wants all that noise and mess on his place?"

R. P.'d been genuinely puzzled. "Don't you wanta be rich, Jansie?" he had asked in an unbelieving voice. "What makes you so ornery?"

Jansie had straightened up to stare at him for a long moment, her own eyes questioning, and when her answer had come, it had seemed intangible and elusive, even in her own ears. "Paw," she had spoken slowly, as if groping her way toward some strange new conception, "What'd you do if you was rich?"

R. P. had looked confused. "Why, I dunno—" he had admitted, "I reckon I'd go down and buy me a whole case of canned peaches, maybe," and then as the magnificence of the idea had grown in his mind, "Yessir! That's just what I'd do! I'd go right downtown, and buy a whole case of canned peaches, maybe two cases, and I'd have me some canned peaches for breakfast, and then for dinner, and then for supper, until I had all the peaches I wanted, for once!" He grinned. "I might just eat till I made myself sick!"

And Jansie had stood, her dark eyes studying him, and she had tried to put her own thoughts into words. "That's it," she had said, half to herself, hardly thinking of the old man. "That's just what I'm a-talking about!"

But the rig had gone on up, timber by timber, across the road. And all day long the teamsters' heavy wagons strained by with their unwieldy loads.

"But it ain't right," she told herself now, as she stood watching, and some instinctive wisdom was strong within her. "People like us have got no business with a lot of money. It just ain't right, somehow!"

A bellowing from the direction of the well drew her attention, and she peered that way to see Willie coming across the pasture, his man-child face lugubrious with pain. One of the drillers, a tall, overalled redhead, was leading him.

Jansie laid down her hoe and shuffled to meet them. "What in the world is the matter, Willie?" she demanded, when she could make herself heard above his self-pitying roars. "Shut up and tell me what's happened."

"He got in the way of a timber, Miss," the driller said in a patient voice. "He ain't hurt much, I reckon, only scared."

Willie held out a mashed and bleeding finger and redoubled his wails for Jansie's benefit.

"Shut up, Willie!" Jansie shouted, reaching for the hurt finger. "How do you expect me to help you when you keep yelling like that?"

Willie subsided, sniffing loudly, and Jansie turned to the driller. "Thank you for bringing him home, Mister," she said politely, and eyed the finger with thoughtful eyes. "I can fix this up. I reckon he must be a nuisance hanging around over there all the time."

"No, Ma'am," The man grinned down at the independent little figure standing before him. "Every time we drill a well, on one of these places, we have to allow for the folks to watch. There's been enough oil struck around here to give them all the idea they're going to be millionaires for sure."

Jansie snorted. "There's no oil under this place," she said succinctly. "Paw's just foolish."

The driller's eyes were surprised. "Well, now, Ma'am," he said gently, "maybe there is! It would be pretty fine to have all the money you wanted, wouldn't it?" His roaming eyes took in the carefully worked garden, the inexpert efforts at

painting and improvement. "You could buy just about anything you wanted, you know." His tone held a faint derision.

Jansie looked up at him. "No," she said quietly. "No, Mister, I don't reckon money'll buy the things I want, now or ever."

"No, Ma'am, I guess not." The man's eyes held a puzzled reluctant respect, and as he moved away toward the road, his hand went, almost involuntarily, to his hat brim in the small gesture of courtesy.

"You, Willie!" Jansie doused the mashed finger with turpentine, and tied a clean rag around it. "Why don't you stay home where you belong? That timber could have hit you in the head!"

But Willie was already forgetting the pain. "Jansie," he said happily. "Willie is going to have a new car when he's rich." He drew his hand away from her fingers in an expansive gesture. "I'm gonna have a car that big! A great big car that goes *whooooosh!*"

Jansie grinned and jerked the finger back to finish her bandaging. "Don't you go getting any crazy notions, Willie," she said matter-of-factly. "You ain't going to be getting no car noways soon," she chuckled. "You, Willie!"

But when the half-wit boy hurried away to resume his scrambling around in the way of the workmen over at the well, Jansie stood staring across the road, the turpentine bottle and rags forgotten in her hand, and her face was bleak with her thoughts. *I don't know how I can manage this family if we strike oil*, she told the Almighty in a worried whisper. *It would be nice for Chris, I reckon, but we're doing all right like we are. You know that.*

Already the growing rig, rising like some tower of Babel against the prairie sky, had cut off the view of the Blue Mountains.

She bent again to her work with a twisted briskness. It was all very well for Paw and Willie to loaf around over there across the road all day long, but somebody had to hoe the garden and fix for some fresh vegetables, while that thing was making up its mind what it was going to do! Then with

a chuckle of dry amusement at men and their scheming, she put the whole matter of the well out of her mind, and went back to the task at hand.

But for once, Willie didn't stay all day at the well. He came home for his noon dinner and, after he had eaten, went in to lie down on the floor by the now cold cookstove.

"What's the matter with you, Willie?" Jansie paused in her movements about the kitchen, to stare down at his big recumbent figure. "Is your finger hurting?"

"Naw." Willie looked at the finger as if it were just called to his attention. "It ain't hurting much." He studied Jansie for a moment with his queer eyes, and rolling over with his back to her, shut his eyes.

Knowing that she would get nothing more out of him for a while, Jansie went on about her work.

But she tried again. "Somebody make you mad over at the well, Willie?" she asked after an interval. "Hurt your feelings, maybe?"

"Naw." Willie didn't even open his eyes to look at her this time, and then he added with a childlike perception of her line of thought, "and I ain't sick neither."

He lay all afternoon on the floor, his big face brooding and sullen. Jansie watched him, but he showed no signs of pain or of distress with his hurt finger, and she was hard put to find some explanation of his depression. Now and then, when she was in the other room, she could hear him muttering angrily.

So the afternoon passed, and still he refused to go out of the dim kitchen.

And as the long shadows of evening deepened across the prairie, he grew increasingly nervous, and getting up followed Jansie about her tasks.

"What are you following me around for, Willie?" she demanded, when she could bear his shadow-like company no longer. "Get on out of this house for a while! You're driving me crazy!"

But Willie merely looked away and murmured unintelligibly.

R. P. looked up from the kitchen table, where he was finishing his cold supper. "Willie didn't hardly eat nothing all day, either," he told Jansie. "You sick, Willie?"

"Naw." Willie glanced over his shoulder with anxious eyes. "Just ain't hungry."

Going to the corner shelf, Jansie took down the lamp and lit it, her gestures business-like and deliberately reassuring. "Here, I'm lighting the lamp," she told the boy. "Now you sit down here by Paw and eat your supper."

But Willie merely drew closer to her. "I don't want nothing," he said plaintively. "I don't want nothing."

Jansie looked up at the big form with worried eyes. "You ain't got no fever?" She touched a hand against his broad, low forehead. "You want to go to bed?"

Willie allowed himself to be settled on his cot behind the stove, "Leave the lamp on," he said beseechingly.

"All right." Jansie went to the table and began stacking the dishes. "I'll wash up and then set down here by the table to read my Bible. Me and Paw will be right here, Willie."

R. P. pushed his plate to Jansie's hand, and going to a cane-bottomed chair near the stove, took off his shoes and wriggled his toes ecstatically. "Ahhhhh!" he sighed contentedly, and leaned his chair back against the wall.

Jansie watched Willie out of the corner of her eye. He was turned toward the wall, and seemed to be asleep.

She went about the business of cleaning up the supper dishes.

But presently the muttering began again from the cot behind the stove. Jansie paused, her face troubled, trying to hear what the half-wit boy was saying. The muttering stopped, then began again, louder this time. "No, no, no," his voice rose a little on the words. "I'm sleepy now, and I don't wanta be bothered —" Then, with a shout of terrified urgency. "No, Joe, no!"

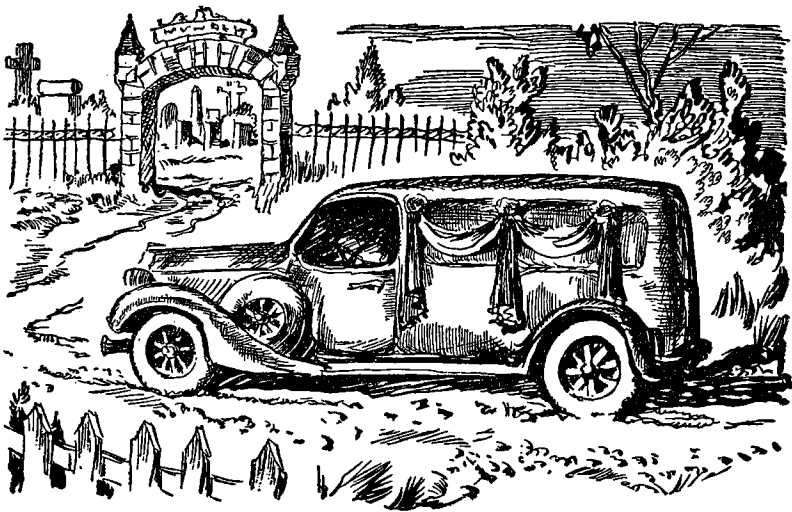
R. P. scrambled up, his face alarmed, and Jansie hurried to the cot to shake the big shoulders. "Willie, Willie." She was almost shouting as if to a heavy sleeper. "What's the matter with you? Who are you talking to?"

Willie shook off her clutching hand, and his eyes were wide with a childlike terror. "You make Joey go away, Jansie," he begged. "Make old Joey go away and leave Willie alone!"

"Joe?" Jansie turned to look about the room, and her voice was puzzled. "Joe?"

"Yes, Joe!" Willie's eyes were wide as they stared past R. P. and Jansie herself, into the emptiness of the shadowy room that lay behind them. "Yes, Joe. He's been follering Willie all day long, and he won't go away and leave Willie alone!" His words ended with a sobbing wail of fear.

And though she knew that when she turned to follow the glance of the half-wit boy, there would be nothing there save the familiar lines of the shabby room, a sudden and unreasoning dread seemed to crawl across Jansie's shoulders.



22

CHRIS walked home from the depot through the gathering spring twilight, and she was grateful for the half-concealment of the dusk. All the way home from Holden, on the rattling little local to the Junction itself, then throughout the longer train ride from the Junction to Collins, she had been in this numb terror of people. For the first time, she knew something of Jansie's fear of Eyes. It was to escape the possibility of Eyes that she chose to take the long way home, skirting around the dusty edges of the town to the shanty on its far edge.

As she walked, her feet heavy from the sleeplessness and anxiety of the long trip, she felt the bump of her purse against her knee like something tangibly filthy. Her heavy bag, dragging at her arm from the other side, was no such weight against her nerves as the purse. All the way home, whenever she had had to open her purse to take out money for a ticket, to put back the diminishing change from the money Miss Ennie had lent her, she had had a sensation of outraged

modesty, as if she were revealing a shameful thing to the public scorn. For, tucked into a pocket behind the miscellaneous trivia of her purse, was the letter from Jack's father. And the check.

Carl had been with her, standing in the hall of Marton, her packed bag in his hand, when Ray had come running down after them with the letter. "Wait, Chris!" Ray's voice was eager with her distress and desire to help. "I forgot to give you this! It came by messenger just a few minutes before you got back." Ray's hand had been shaking a little as she had held out the unstamped envelope. "Oh, Chris," and her usually brisk voice had been almost childish with the pain of sympathy, "I wish I could do something."

Chris had taken the envelope, looking at it with absent eyes. *It must have come while I was at Miss Ennie's*, she had thought, but her real attention had been for her roommate. "You've already done more than you should, Ray," she assured the girl. "And I'll always love you for it." Then, still holding the envelope with disinterested fingers, she'd said, because there was nothing more to be said, "Good-bye, Ray!"

"Look, Chris," Carl's hand had been gentle on her shoulder as he had stood beside her in the chair car a little later that night, "don't let this get you down. You'll get through it, and," his dark eyes had been earnest upon hers, "things will come right for you again. You'll see!"

She had smiled up at him, not believing him, but comforted by his nearness and concern. "It's not me I'm worried about this time, Carl," she smiled wryly up at him. "This time I'm worried about Jansie, and sick about — Joe. It seems so unfair, somehow, about Joe —" She choked back the rush of words that had sprung into her throat. "I can't tell you, Carl, how kind Joe was to me, sometimes. He, he just never had a chance!"

"I know," Carl's face had been troubled and strangely understanding. "I know, Chris." Then as the little train had jerked its intention to start, he had bent above her. "Look, Chris, dearest, I'm here, if you need me!"

And he had kissed her, gently and softly on the forehead.

She had been halfway to the Junction before she had thought to open the envelope in her hand. *We are deeply sorry about your trouble, Mr. Duncan's scrawl had been hasty, and we would like to have you accept this token of our concern.* Then a quick postscript, *I'm sure a marriage as you young people have planned would never be a success, Miss Sanders, and I'm sure that you, too, are sensible enough to see it.* It had been signed, *John M. Duncan.* But it was Jack's mother's cold eyes that Chris had seen in her heart as she had unfolded the check for five hundred dollars.

There had been nothing to do except to fold it away and go on thinking. But it was bitter thinking. *He believes that I opened it before I left Holden, and kept it.* The thought was a slow burning of anger and hurt. *He thinks he has bought me off, and Jack thinks so, too, by now. They are probably on their way back to Austin by now, glad that it's so easily settled.* Then, at the thought of Jack, she realized that he had not come, nor called, nor made any gesture.

The lights of the shanty were dim across the prairie as Chris came nearer, along the edge of the new shell road. *They know,* she thought with a weary certainty. *Someone has told them by now.* And suddenly a great need to see Jansie swept over her, and a childish desire to cry, to sob aloud and unrestrainedly. She choked back the tears in her throat and hurried her feet through the dust, almost running toward the shanty lights.

Inside the smithy, she groped her way through the dimness toward the crack of light at the top of the steps. At the kitchen door, she paused, listening, but no sound came out to her. *Where are they?* The thought was unreasoningly fearful. *Where have they gone?* She opened the door in panic.

Jansie, on her knees by the cot behind the stove, turned at the sound of the opening door. Seeing Chris, she knelt there, staring, and her dark face was illuminated with love and troubled concern. "Who told you, honey?" she asked softly.

Chris crossed the room with heavy feet and sat down on the cot. "I read it in the papers, Jansie," she said simply, and looked down into the dark face. "I came straight home."

Then, as Jansie continued to kneel, her hands still folded in an attitude of supplication, Chris asked, "Who are you praying for Jansie? Joe?"

Sadness fell across the dark eyes like a pall. "No, it's too late to pray for Joe, now," Jansie said gently. "Joe's gone, and all *that* is with God. I was praying for some way to get his body home to bury it." Her voice was deeply troubled. "I can't bear to have him buried out there in some potter's field. He — he'd want to be here!"

The thought of the picture in the paper, the boyish looking body on the alien sidewalk, went through Chris like a stab of pain. "I know," she said huskily. "I guess he — wouldn't want to be left out there."

There was a silence in the dim kitchen, and there was silence between the kneeling crippled woman and the girl sitting beside her on the cot.

Presently, Chris asked. "Where's Paw?" Then she added, "and Willie?"

"Willie's over at the oil well, hanging around there watching," Jansie answered, "And Paw," her voice grew wry, "Paw's somewhere talking about Joe, I reckon. Paw ain't had this much attention in years and — he likes it."

"I see." Chris sat quiet for a long moment, then she laughed, a sound that was bitter in the room. "Well, I guess I've got the answer to your prayer, Jansie," she told the crippled woman.

Jansie looked up at her and her face was troubled at Chris' tone. "What do you mean?" she asked.

For answer, Chris opened her purse and bringing out the letter, extracted the check. "Here," her voice was dull with bitterness, "This'll do it."

Jansie looked at the amount on the check and shook her head. "No, Chris," she said simply, "I don't know where or how you got it, but there's something wrong about it or you wouldn't have that much money." Her dark eyes were sick.

Chris laughed again. "Use it, Jansie," she said quietly. "There's been nothing wrong, like you're thinking, and that's

the absolute truth." Her voice was sullen and harsh. "But you can take my word for something else, too. *I've earned it!*"

So Joe Sanders came home.

He came home to Jansie, who walked with a stern new quietness that lay, aging and wearying but dreadfully serene, upon her dark features. She moved among the staring, whispering, almost-pleasure of the neighbors' endless curiosity as among ghosts. For, somewhere in the clear aloneness that lay deep within her own soul, Jansie was facing Joe. Facing his life, and the long days that had passed in the shanty, facing her own failure.

"I could justify myself, I reckon," she told Chris, when, on the afternoon of the third day, they sat together beside Joe's body, waiting for the release of the burial. "I reckon I could say that I was ignorant and poor and ugly, and it would all be true, and I could say I couldn't help what happened. But," and her still voice broke on the horrible word, "I reckon nothing on God's green earth can make me forget that I had some chance, and that that's all gone now, any chance I ever had to help him!"

And as they sat there, Time stood beside them, leering and inevitable, terrible Time. It beat at them with the tick of Jansie's old clock, somewhere in the shadowed depths of the bedroom, and the years, the escaped, pitiful, unused years, were like water behind, already evaporated in the hard white light of eternity.

Joe Sanders came home to R. P., too. But there was more reality for the old man in the pleasant flash of the light bulbs in the hands of a newspaper photographer, in the flying pencil of the interested young reporter from Dallas, than in the awful clarity of Joe's freckles against the color of death. R. P. blew his nose into the silky whiteness of a generously-loaned handkerchief, and put out of his mind the thought of the strangely gaping holes that even the well-paid skill of the Fairfield undertaker had not been able to eradicate.

Joe came home to Willie, too. To an uneasy Willie, half expecting the stilled lips to open in a teasing, cruel grin. To

a nervous and troubled Willie, resisting the impulse to howl mournfully back at the persistent cats that gathered in the scrub about the shanty as evening came on, their strange knowledge of the presence of death luring them on. To a Willie who hurried across the road to the reassuring lights of the well and the good, masculine shouts of the drillers. Not even the excellent, sardonically tasty meals supplied in systematic rotation by the Ladies' Aid, could tempt Willie away from the comforting rhythm of banging machinery.

But most of all, Joe came home to Chris.

The day of the funeral was hot and clear, too hot for May. Nature seemed bent on ignoring the very existence of death, and the prairie about the shanty smiled with the allurements of rampant life. All day, from the earliest light, cars passed the house, cars and wagons and people on foot and horseback, farmers and townspeople and the well-shod feet of curious strangers. Never, in all the march of the years, had the shanty known such a flux of passersby.

Now and then, on some pretext or another, someone would come in, Dr. McLean, and several of the women assigned to that day's lunch, and the assistant funeral director. Voices would hush as they passed and repassed the figure lying in Jansie's room, and Joe Sanders was able to command in death some measure of the respect for which he had so longed in life.

Chris met the visitors in stiffened, white-lipped calm, not like Jansie's dark serenity, but without peace, an inner working of pain. Deep smears of shadow lay under her eyes, and she had not been able to sleep since she had left Holden. She made no pretense at eating the funeral meats, the elaborate salads and rolls and desserts.

"Come on, Chris." Grandma Cockrill's face was concerned as she passed an overlarge bowl of potato salad across the table in the kitchen, "Try to eat. You'll need it to keep up your strength, for — everything."

But Chris only shook her head, hardly seeing the old friend's solicitous, troubled eyes, hardly hearing the unnatural soft comings and goings of the Ladies' Aid Committee-for-Lunch-on-the-Day-of-the-Funeral. She was weak from fasting and

sleeplessness, and the strain of these last three days was draining her. And as her strength ebbed, everything about her assumed a mauve-lit vividness of suffering. It was as if, as feeling and sensation drained away, a fourth dimension of understanding was laid bare.

Here we are, she thought with the queer new sense of revelation, *all of us — the Sanders! Paw, sitting there enjoying the iced tea and the fishy new taste of shrimp salad, hardly knowing that Joe is dead and hardly caring, either. I wonder if Paw ever had much feeling*, she thought without rancor, *maybe real feeling was just left out of him!*

Then there's Willie, blubbing over a sandwich outside there in the shop, because he's afraid to come in as long as Joe is there in the bedroom. Even Willie has sense enough to be scared!

She turned and her hazel-green eyes watched Jansie, the long, calm hands courteously messing the food in a pretense of eating, the quiet dark face with its inscrutable pain. *What has made Jansie?* Chris asked herself with a kind of wonder, *Why, out of all of us, is she what she is? Is it strength, or is it because she is hunchbacked? Why — why — is Jansie?"*

And Joe, her thoughts marched on like small beating pulses in her head, *Joe — how could Joe have been different? What made Joe? Is Jansie right? Could Joe have been anything else?*

And then, as if her thoughts had beaten their way through some thick growth, she came to their edge. *What am I?* and the answer lay just beyond her reach. *What is there in me, and where am I going? Last week, I thought I knew the answer, and today, I'm lost again! What does Chris Sanders mean? Who is this "I", this being?*

The funeral was to be at three o'clock, and by two-thirty people were coming and going in a steady stream of flimsy excuses. People seemed to spring from the scrub outside, and as the undertaker's big car came to drive the family to the funeral chapel, onlookers almost lined the road to town. Every small house, every neighborhood store, every tree-shade along the way, sprouted its own crop of peering watchers.

Jansie, exhausted after a long struggle to get Willie cleaned up and into the car, sat back and closed her eyes, completely indifferent to the fact that their way had become a gauntlet.

R. P. looked from side to side from his place beside the driver of the car, and his look was that of a pleased child, happy to be the center of attraction.

Willie cowered, trembling, in his corner, his face lugubrious with distress.

But Chris sat stiff and straight beside the crippled woman and her face was tense and still above the Holden Sunday black, her hands white-knuckled in her lap. Every half-pleased stare, every sensation-loving whisper along the way was a small, tapping blow against her nerves. *Tap, tap, tap, tap*, a stare, a gesture, a look, a movement, each had its impact. In her weariness and hurt, she was raw to life.

In the chapel, it was scarcely better. Out of the dozens sitting crowded into the velvet and satin elegance of the unnatural little room, few knew the Sanders at all well. Though Jansie and Chris had attended Doctor McLean's church for years, he scarcely knew them, and he was ill at ease. Now and then, as he struggled with the difficult message, he threw an uneasy glance at the sardonic quietness of the freckled face against the satin pillow.

Once, Chris caught herself following his glance, and it came to her with a dull shock that Joe had seemed more at home against the sidewalk.

When it was all over, there was the walk out again, through the massed curiosity of the crowded street. There were the cameras, trained on the coffin and then on the family, running gloating lenses over their queerness, Jansie's hunchback, and R. P.'s tearful agedness. Each click was like a slap across Chris' face.

But Time, the enemy, turned friend at last. For with every breath, every footstep, it was nearer over. Even before the mortician's long car had drawn away from the curb, headed for the cemetery, the Eyes were already turning away, searching for a new sensation. Footsteps were already quickening toward tomorrow's crime, tomorrow's victim, tomorrow's

death. Yesterday's death was already old, as old as the blowing newspapers along the gutter, as old as the pictured image of Joe's bullet-riddled body, stacked away, tied in bundles and forgotten.

It was over.

And when the undertaker's car had deposited them once more at the smithy doorway, Jansie and Chris followed the old man and the half-wit boy into the dim shanty.

"Well, poor Joe's gone," R. P. sighed in the gentle, suffering voice that he had learned to use these last days. "He's gone and buried."

Willie sobbed gently with the half-frightened note that was his instinctive reaction to the fact of death, and explored the cold food left in the cupboard by the Ladies' Aid committee. "Willie's hungry," he told Jansie in an accusingly plaintive voice. "Willie's awful hungry!"

R. P. looked more cheerful. "Me, too," he agreed sadly.

Jansie went into the bedroom and laid her old hat on the bureau. Behind her, in the little room, shadowed in the fading light of the spring afternoon, she could see the bed pushed back, where it had been moved to make room for the coffin that almost seemed to be still there. *I wonder if I'll ever get Joe's coffin out of my heart*, she thought with pain.

Back in the kitchen, Chris had cleared a stack of newspapers from the table. "Where do you want me to put these, Paw?" she asked in a tired voice. "I want to set the table for Jansie." Somehow, she thought, she could not seem to come back to a sense of reality. The strange detachment of the afternoon seemed to go on and on, and the man and the foolish boy, the dim little room with its shabby furnishings, even Jansie's footsteps as she moved about the bedroom, putting it to rights after Joe's last resting within it, seemed unreal and vaguely far away.

R. P. looked up from a pre-supper snack of cold chicken. "Don't throw them away," he commanded. "Some of them newspaper folks left 'em. They said they had our pitchers in

'em." He looked pleased. "We've had our pitchers in nearly ever' paper that's come out this week."

Mechanically, Chris stacked the papers, one on top of another, and turned to lay them on the cot by the stove. Her eyes, with the automatic reaction of reading, glanced down at the top one.

Jansie, coming in from the bedroom, saw her stiffen to stare down at the page. Her face turned sick.

"Now, Chris," Jansie went over to tug at the paper, "Don't be reading them things over and over! It won't do Joe no good now, and you'll make yourself sick!"

But Chris raised dazed eyes that were dark with a helpless new pain. "I— I—" Her voice faltered and she looked queerly about the familiar little room.

Puzzled, Jansie glanced down to read the item uppermost on the folded paper.

Daughter of Old State Family Weds Wealthy Oklahoma Oil Scion, she read. "Miss Vivian MacComber, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. L. E. MacComber, became the bride today of Mr. Jack Duncan, son of the wealthy Tulsa oil family. The marriage came as a surprise to their many—"

But Jansie read no further. For at this instant, the paper fell from Chris' limp fingers, and Chris, herself, with a little sigh, collapsed quietly on the floor at Jansie's feet.



23

Eva had been sitting there by the bed for a long time, light and darkness and light again, over and over, maybe forever. Eva was still a little girl, still golden-haired and eternally smiling. But Eva was there, always there.

Sometime between sleeping and waking, between hands that coaxed something cold and good into her mouth, and hands that stroked and washed her, Chris knew that someone was trying to make her be grown-up, a grown-up Chris who hurt!

Only Eva was willing her to be a little girl again. Growing up had been a mistake, for growing up meant pain. She couldn't remember why it hurt, because her head was tired, but there was a hurt in growing up, a hurt that pressed and pressed and pressed.

Only Eva would help her run away from that hurting.

Back, back, to Sunday School, maybe. Back to the nicest little girls who all belonged to the church. You can belong to the church, too, Chris. Yes, I'll belong to the church, too,

then I'll be one of the nicest little girls! But why, what does it mean? I don't know. I just want to be one of the nicest little girls, Jansie!

Go back further then. Sunday School hurts.

Back to school, Eva? Back to that poem about dying? It was nice, wasn't it? If I should die — but who died? Someone died. It was Annie, Annie and Joe. No, no, dying wasn't nice! It hurt. Go back further than that, Eva?

Back to the first grade, maybe, to Miss Emily, who was kind? But Miss Emily couldn't be kind for all the others, too! That pencil tablet? That hurt.

No, go back further than school, Eva. It hurt, too.

Back to the woods, little Chrissie! Back to the scrub where you pranced around without your dress.

Oh, but that hurt, too! Jansie spanked her for that, didn't she?

Back some more, Eva!

Back some more, Chris, — back — back — back —

But Jansie wouldn't let her go back. *Eva, Jansie wants me to stay here. Jansie pulls with her hands and her voice and won't let me go back! Jansie calls to Paw and Willie, talks to Doctor Smalling—*

"Jansie! Jansie!" Chris opened her eyes and looked about her. Eva was gone and Jansie stood beside the bed in the lean-to bedroom. She was smiling, and held a glass of something milky-looking in her hand. "Hello, Chris!" Jansie's voice was quiet and real, not like the dream of a voice, demanding and harsh. "Hello, Chris! You back again? Could you eat a little?"

No, no, Chris closed her eyes again.

And there was Eva, smiling, smiling. But Eva wasn't so nice, anymore. Silly Eva, always smiling! *I am grown up, Eva! How can I help it even if it does hurt?*

Smiling, smiling! Go away, Eva! Jansie is talking again.

Chris opened her eyes, and, strangely, this time it was night in the little room. There was Jansie, sitting by the bed, her body half wrapped in a quilt. "Hello, Jansie—"

Jansie threw aside the quilt and shuffled to the edge of the bed. "Hello, Chris—"

Maybe it was only a trick of the moonlight and the shaded lamp on the bureau that threw those darker shadows under Jansie's dark eyes. "Hello, Chris—"

"Tired," then, "Jansie, shouldn't you be asleep?"

"No, Chris, I'm all right, but try to stay this time—"

Go away, Eva! I have to be grown-up. Jansie wants me to.

But the hurting, the hurting?

"If I'm to be grown up, Jansie," Chris said clearly, "I'll have to think about it tomorrow. Now, I'm tired and want—to — sleep —"

Chris opened her eyes to find Jansie still sitting by the bed, still wrapped in the quilt. But even as she looked Jansie's eyes opened suddenly and were bright upon her.

"Hello, Jansie," Chris said gently. "Have I been sick?"

Jansie nodded, and Chris wondered vaguely if she had, perhaps, been sick for years. For Jansie looked so old, and tired and terribly thin.

"Yes, you have," Jansie answered and her voice was as tired as her eyes. "You've been sick a long time."

Chris looked about the clean little room, turning her head a little to see the three-legged bureau, the smoky, turned-down lamp, whose feeble light still struggled against the rich light of the summer morning. Light poured through the small panes of the window and across the whiteness of the bed sheet.

Jansie uncurled from the quilt, and came to the bed. "You better, Chris?" she asked, almost fearfully.

Chris smiled and raised a thin hand, to survey its transparency with wondering eyes. "I guess I am," she agreed weakly, and went back to sleep.

No more Eva.

The next time she awakened it was afternoon, and the small room lay shadowed about her. "Jansie!" She knew sudden panic. "Jansie! Where are you?"

Footsteps hurried and Jansie came in from the kitchen. "Just fixing supper, honey. You awake again? You want some—"

thing to eat? The doctor says you can have some soup if you want it."

Chris made a wry face. "Soup? Who wants soup? I want a ham sandwich!"

Jansie laughed suddenly, but the quick tears were heavy in her dark eyes.

Presently R.P. and Willie came in, smiling and shuffling awkwardly about the bed. Chris looked at them, and closed her eyes, hating them. For in their faces, she saw the thing that had cost her her love.

"How long have I been sick? she asked Jansie one morning, when, after a good night, she awakened curious and interested in herself. "Have I been sick very long?"

"Three weeks, Chris," Jansie answered. "You've been a mighty sick girl, too. You've had me worried."

Chris sighed, and was conscious of the sleeves of her clean cotton nightgown about her thin wrists. Things like clean sheets and the taste of soup, and sunlight across the bed, were suddenly delicious. "I'm better now," she decided aloud. "I'm much better!"

Jansie sighed. "Try to rest, then, Chris. Rest and don't think. There's time for that later."

Jansie went away, back to the kitchen, and Chris lay listening to the sound of the shuffling footsteps on the kitchen floor.

And she thought of Jack.

How could I have expected to come out of this, she thought without rancor, out of a shanty, and a family like Paw and Willie — to marry a man like Jack? But at the thought of him, of his laughter, the feel of his hair under her fingers, of his lips against hers, the sound of her name in his voice, her heart turned sick and weak with hurt. I'll love him always, she thought wearily, and tears of weakness lay against her cheek. He'll be here, hurting my heart, until I die!

"Chris," Jansie's voice was soft and hesitant, "Chris, I want to ask you something."

Outside, the noontime lay voluptuous over the prairie. Chris was stronger now, and the pillows at her back felt bracing and right.

Jansie sat across the room, her long hands busy with knitting.

"What is it, Jansie?" Chris asked, and her eyes were on the crippled woman.

"Chris, are you in trouble?"

Startled, Chris stared for a moment at the small, hunched figure, then her smile dimmed to tenderness. "No, Jansie," her voice was quiet, "I'm not 'in trouble' the way you mean. No," she said half to herself, and her voice hardened. "There was never even that between us. You see," she looked at Jansie with bitter eyes, "I thought I'd get married. I wish now," she said grimly, "that I'd at least—"

"Oh no!" Jansie's cry was hurt and sudden in the room. "Don't say such a thing, Chris!"

Chris laughed harshly and turned over to rest a cheek on her hand. "Why not, Jansie?" she asked coolly. "What would anyone expect of Chris Sanders, whose own father gave her away, and whose brother was Joe Sanders?"

Jansie made no answer, but her eyes were sick.

"Jansie," Chris was studying the ceiling of the bedroom as she went on, "why haven't you asked me what happened to me? Her voice rose in the quick irritation of illness. "Why do you just sit there day after day, knitting, knitting, knitting, and being as patient as — Job! Why don't you ask me what happened?"

Jansie's long fingers trembled a little on their work, but her voice was quiet as she answered. "I did ask you if you were in trouble—" she reminded the girl, "but—"

Chris laughed again. "I answered you, didn't I? No, I'm not in trouble but I hurt — here —" Her lips trembled childishly as she laid her hand against her breast. "I think I wanted to die that day when I saw the paper."

"Yes," Jansie answered. "I know, honey."

Chris raised herself to a shaking elbow, and glared at the crippled woman. "How do you know?" she demanded. "How can you know what happened and how I feel?"

"Carl David was here," Jansie answered simply.

Chris fell back against the pillow and tears of exhausted weakness and surprise smeared down her cheeks. "When did he come?" she asked. "And why?"

Jansie laid her lace on her lap, and folded her hands. "He came," she said quietly, "a few hours after the funeral. He tried to get here in time for the funeral itself, but his train was late. You were delirious that night, and he didn't get to see you at all. But we talked for awhile, and he told me all about this man you planned to marry, and all that happened!"

Chris was crying weakly, and the tears ran unchecked down to the pillow. "I wish I could have seen him," was all she could manage to say.

Jansie studied the girl for a long moment, then getting up, she went to the bureau drawer and brought out a small packet of letters. "These came while you were sick," she told the girl. "Some of them are from Carl David, one seems to be from your roommate, and I don't know about the others."

Chris picked up the packet and spread it fanwise before her. "Yes, one is from Ray." Her voice was still husky from tears. "Three from Carl, and—," she looked at a pale blue envelope with precise little handwriting, "this one is from Miss Ennie. This last one," she held up a long, official-looking envelope, "is from Dean Evans, I think."

She let the letters fall unopened on the sheet and fell back against the pillow. "Why are women so foolish, Jansie?" she said in a listless voice. "I halfway hoped one letter would be from him! I just can't seem to get it through my head that he must be on his honeymoon!"

Jansie sat, her hands busy again and her dark face deeply troubled, but she made no answer. There was none to be made.

"Jansie," Chris said at last out of the silence, and her glance went through the window to the well across the road, "it would have made a lot of difference if that well had made us rich before — before —"

Jansie frowned and her face was suddenly stubborn. "It wouldn't have done no good," she insisted. "Money wouldn't have made Joe good."

Chris turned her head and her eyes were sardonic. "No?" she said coolly. "He wouldn't have had to kill to get it, then, Jansie."

Jansie sighed out of the troubled depths of her heart. "It ain't no answer, money ain't," she said defensively. "It wouldn't make me straight and," she grinned a little, "good-looking! It wouldn't bring Joe back, and it wouldn't make Paw young. It wouldn't make Willie smart!" Then her voice dropped on a note of hesitation. "I don't know that it would even have meant much to you if you'd had it in time to marry that fellow, Chris!" she said gently, "If he was that kind, he must not have been—well—"

"Much of a man." Chris finished the sentence for her. "No, I can see that, Jansie," she agreed, and her eyes were hard. "In fact, I guess he isn't much of a man. I lie here, day after day, telling myself that, and telling myself all the bad things that I can think of about him, and yet," she looked at Jansie and her face was defenseless, "I go right on loving him, and hating myself for doing it!"

Jansie sighed and got up to walk slowly to the window. "I almost wish," she said thoughtfully, "that that old thing over there would come in a gusher. Just so's you could have the satisfaction of showing that fellow, Chris!"

Chris smiled ruefully. "I do too," she admitted, "but really, what good would it do, now?"

Still, there was a wry hope in her voice.

"Well," Jansie shrugged, and turning away from the window, glanced at the unopened letters still lying on the bed. "Wishing won't do it, and don't you want to open them letters, Chris? See what people have to say?"

Chris nodded indifferently. "You read them to me," she suggested.

Jansie shook her head. "No, I ain't so good at reading other people's writing, yet," she said humbly. "I do pretty good with yours and Mr. Robertson's," and Chris did not see

the quick flush of pleasure with which Jansie pronounced the preacher's name. "He wrote me after he left here. But I'm still pretty slow on other writing, so—." She stood up and gathered up the small pile, "I'll just put them back here until you feel like reading them."

Chris made a shamed effort to come out of her self-absorption. "What does Mr. Robertson have to say in his letters?" she asked, turning over on her side to smile gently at Jansie. "He's in China by now, isn't he?"

Jansie picked up her knitting with unsteady fingers and cleared her throat. "Yes, that's right," she said almost brusquely, then, pressed by the unbearable pressure on a woman to talk about the man she loves, she added, "He's working too hard, though, I reckon."

"I'll tell you, Jansie." Chris' eyes were tenderly wise, "Why don't you get his letters and read them to me. I'd like to hear them."

Jansie flushed and her eyes did not look up from her work. "Well, there ain't but one, so far," she admitted, studying her stitches intently. "It's a mighty long ways to China. Letters take time to come, you know."

"Of course it's a long way," Chris agreed softly, "and I think it's wonderful that he had time to write at all! Missionaries are very busy people, and he must like you very much, Jansie."

The hunchbacked woman flushed a deep crimson, and getting up, went to the bureau. There she fumbled and fumbled until it dawned on Chris that she was to look away. So the girl glanced, with ostentatious casualness, out of the window, into the sunlit summer day. When she turned back, Jansie had her letter in her hand. And her Bible lay on top of the dresser. *She's keeping it in her Bible*, Chris thought. *It means that much to her!*

Jansie sat down, and unfolding the almost-frayed pages, read aloud. It was a long letter, full of friendliness and the gossipy details of his daily life. "'You see, Jansie'" he wrote, "'How fine it is to be able to read! Here I am, away off here in China, talking to you, away down there in Texas! And

all because you learned to read. Now aren't you glad that you did?"

Jansie looked up, and Chris nodded. Then the crippled woman read on, "'This new station here in the interior was so desperately needed!'" the letter went on, "'There's so much to be done, so many miles of territory to cover, so many thousands to be reached—and by three of us! Helen and Dillard Jameson, my co-workers, are grand people, though, and I couldn't choose finer folks to be isolated with. Dillard is a doctor, and Helen helps him in our dingy little clinic, though she herself is not well, just now.'"

"We could use ten missionaries out here and all of them would be overworked. Sometimes I go to bed at night so tired that even the lumpy places in my bed feel wonderful! I'm not so fat as when you saw me last—" Jansie raised troubled eyes, "He wasn't fat then," she remarked. "'But Dil says it will do me good to tone down a little!'"

"It does sound as if he were working too hard," Chris agreed, but her sympathy was really for the defenseless dark eyes before her.

Jansie's eyes were brooding as she slipped the pages back into their envelope, and, forgetting to be circumspect, put them tenderly once more between the pages of her Bible.

As the days passed, slow with the peace and warm sleepiness of summer, Chris became less bitter in her hurt. As she grew stronger, sitting up to watch the comings and goings of the small household, noting the progress of the well, the lights and lusty noises, she grew strong enough to think again.

"Jansie," she remarked one sunny afternoon when the two of them sat outside in the shade of the smithy, Chris with a book, and Jansie with her endless knitting, "Jansie, you know Dean Evans sent me my credits, even though I missed the last days of the term—"

"Yes, I know," Jansie answered.

"Well, I'm wondering if I can't get a teaching job next year, after all. What do you think?"

"I think maybe," Jansie's face was pleased, "If you're strong enough."

Chris frowned thoughtfully. "Oh, I'll be strong enough," she answered, "and I want to pay back that five hundred dollars, if it takes ten years!"

Jansie looked up quickly, and her face was suddenly bright. "That's right, Chrissie!" She struggled for words to express her enthusiastic approval. "That's right, honey! You go to it, and I'll help you!" Then overcome with her own unprecedented emotion, she stood up and hurried into the house. "I've got to get supper!"

And presently, there came, to Chris' astonishment, not only the clatter of pans from the kitchen, but also Jansie's voice, husky and slightly cracked, lifted in the strains of *How Firm a Foundation!*

But there were harder days, too, alternating with the increasing sureness of the good ones. Those were the days when Chris lay in bed longer than was necessary for her daily rest, staring up at the ceiling of the little bedroom.

"What is it, Jansie?" she asked one day, after a long hour of such wide-eyed staring. "What is it?"

"What is what?" Jansie's eyes, as they looked up from her work, were quick with alarm. "What are you talking about, Chris?" She came over to the bed to touch the girl's forehead with a casual hand.

Chris smiled. "Oh, I'm not delirious again, Jansie. I've just been doing a little thinking. What is it that has kept you going on all these years, has even—," she frowned with the effort to make her words clearer, "has even built you up, sort of, when the rest of us Sanders weren't getting much of anywhere, at all! You're the only one of us who is really a person, Jansie." The unspoken thought of Jansie's affliction was heavy between them, "even though you've been the one who had the most to—bear."

Jansie's face grew troubled at the girl's words, but she made no effort to evade their meaning. "Well," she hesitated in the effort to phrase the intangible, "It's hard to say clear, Chris, but the fact is, I haven't been carrying my load alone, all this time."

Chris looked puzzled. "No? Well, who has helped you?"

Jansie flushed. "I reckon you'd say my Saviour has helped me." She stammered a little on the unaccustomed expression of emotion. "He has been right with me when I needed Him."

Chris shrugged. "Of course, I know you're a Christian, Jansie. In fact," she said thoughtfully, "I've always considered myself a Christian. I joined the church when I was little, and I've always thought of it as, well—something you needed to have, like a good education or decent clothes, or keeping clean. Something sort of special that nearly everybody had. But what I'm trying to find out," she went back to her question, "is where you've got this—this sureness that has pulled you—and me along?"

Jansie's face grew bleak. "I failed on Joe, though," she said out of an inner troubling. "I didn't pull him along."

"I know," Chris admitted. "Joe is one of the things I've hated to face, too. That, and the mess I've made of my own life, lately. Yet you, Jansie, with less than any of us to do with—"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you," Jansie said patiently, "I've had His help—"

"Tell me, then," Chris agreed with a new humbleness. "I'll listen. I think," she said slowly, "that maybe I've missed the point—"

Jansie brought her chair nearer to the bed. "I don't understand all the big words yet, Chris," she said slowly, and her eyes were deep with concern. "I been reading as hard as I could to try and catch up with other grown folks that has been studying it all their lives. But it's been only since Mr. Robertson left that I could read and I go slow, mighty slow. Sometimes," and the dark eyes smiled in their depths, "Sometimes, I think when I get to Heaven, I'll be put right in the primary class!"

"But as far as I can see," she went on, "Being born into the Kingdom of God is a lot like being born into the world— it ain't nice and neat and pretty!" She put her chin on her long

hand and studied Chris. "Do you know, Chris, I believe folks try to make it neat and pretty too much."

"All the nice little girls belong—" Chris quoted wryly.

Jansie nodded. "Yes, that's what I mean. Well, when your mother died giving you birth, Chris, it was terrible—" She paused again and the memory of that night so long ago was once more vivid within her.

Chris recalled her, "Then Jansie," she asked, staring at the ceiling, and her voice was diffident, "How does one go about being—well—born into the Kingdom of God?"

Jansie frowned deeply with the effort of words. "Well, like I said before, Chris," she said slowly, "I can't say it all correct, like some folks. I wish—" she said with a deep inner fervency, "That Charles was here!"

"Well, he isn't, so you go on," Chris said firmly.

"As far as I can make out from the Bible, and from what happened to me," Jansie explained, "you have to be mighty sorry about being such a mess of a sinner. I ain't saying," she said quickly, "that you're anything like as mean as I was, Chris—"

"Yes, I am a sinner, Jansie," Chris' voice was low and humble. "I know that."

"Then," Jansie said slowly, "Something just sort of pulls at you, something clear outside yourself, kind of, and makes you want to throw yourself on Jesus, Chris. He does the rest. When He gets through with you, you're just born again."

"Is that all?" asked Chris. "Don't you have to do something?"

"He's already done all there is to do, on the cross," Jansie said simply. "All you can do is to accept what He's done. He took the punishment Hissself."

"And then—?" asked Chris.

"And then," Jansie said, "You're like a live baby. Sometimes this newborn soul grows straight and fine, and sometimes it's as crooked and queer as me. But—" and her voice lifted on a note of great certainty, "one way or another, fast or slow, straight or all twisted, if it's born, it grows. It's alive!"

Nobody," and her voice dropped, "has been slower than me to grow, I guess, but I'm a-going along!"

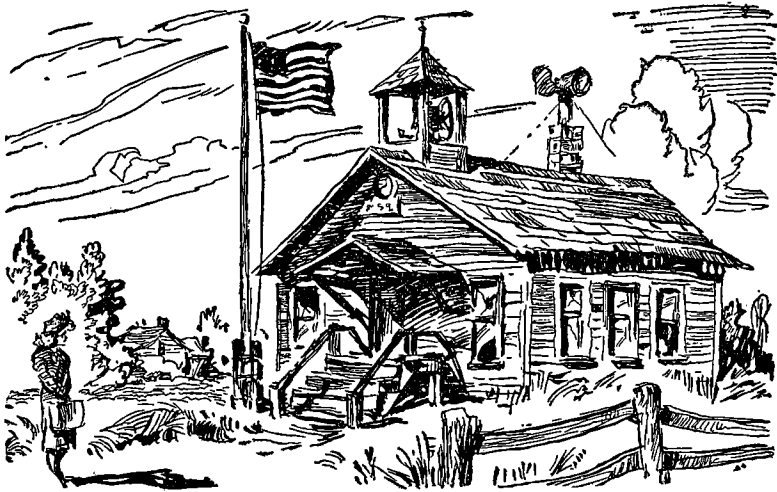
"How about denying Christ?" Chris asked. "What if one does that?"

Jansie's eyes smiled. "Did you ever see a baby deny being alive?" she asked succinctly. "He may holler and refuse to eat and be generally ornery, but he can't deny that he's alive!"

Chris smiled in response, then her face grew quiet with her thoughts. She lay looking at the ceiling for a long time. Tears trickled down the sides of her face and onto the pillow under her head.

After a while, she closed her eyes and whispered, loud enough for Jansie to hear, "Here I am, Lord, a sinner. Let me be born into Thy Kingdom in the name of Thy Son, Jesus."

And Jansie, sitting with bowed, quiet head, knew how much greater this moment was than that time all those years ago. "And her soul will be perfect, Lord," she whispered softly. "Just perfect!"



24

BUT Chris found, when illness-weakened June had drifted by and then, with that inert imperceptibility that is characteristic of convalescence, time moved into July and August, that it was not going to be easy to get a school. Not only did she have the handicap of being late in her efforts, but everywhere, in all the better paid schools, even in the country districts, she came up against the almost tangible wall of Joe's reputation.

Day after hot day she trudged to the bus to travel the miles to another consolidated school, then, day after day, she came back to the shanty, beaten. She talked to former school board members in their fields. Her face was still troubled and pale from illness, as she stood in the glare of the summer sun, her purse clutched in nervous fingers, and her best shoes inappropriate and uncomfortable in the dust of the peanut rows. She talked to drawling, joke-cracking school boards assembled to look her over, to question her. But always the answer was the same, she should have applied earlier, or,

if the position were still admittedly open, the answers would be evasive and uncertain and the men's eyes would not meet hers. They'd let her know, that is—and she would go away knowing, with a sick certainty, that the next time she heard, the position would be inexplicably "filled."

"It's no use, Chris," Jansie said, when, one hot day late in August, the girl came home from a long trip to make application for a distant county school, "You might as well give it up. They ain't going to give a teaching job to Joe Sanders' sister!"

Chris was lying on the bed, her hat and purse on the floor beside her. Tears of sheer frustration were streaking the faint mist of summer dust on her face. But at Jansie's words, she turned over and regarded the crippled woman with surprised eyes, "You don't sound like yourself, Jansie," she remarked, "I've never seen you so discouraged before. Has something happened?"

Jansie sat, her long hands unaccustomedly idle in her lap, "Listen," she commanded in a gentle voice, "Listen, Chrissie."

Chris listened and the deep silence of the prairie wrapped firmly about them, about the little house and the quiet room. Only the lonely sound of the endless prairie breeze murmured through the cracks and foibles of the old house, "Wh—" Chris began, then stopped, her face dismayed, "The well! It's stopped!"

Jansie nodded, and her own face reflected the girl's disappointment, "I always knew that old thing wouldn't do us no good," she said bitterly, "and now they've shut it down, just when we was beginning to get some hopes and when the going is hardest for you, Chrissie. I'm so—so—mad at the old thing!"

Chris laughed in spite of her distress, "You must be mad at it, Jansie!" she teased gently, "To take it so personally."

Then she asked, "Why did they shut it down?"

Jansie's face was still grim, "Paw went over to see, and come home with some tale about them saying they was out of money and they didn't guess there was any oil there, anyway! Humph! There is, too, oil under this land!"

Chris grinned, "Is that right?" she asked with a teasing solemnity, "And when did you decide that, Jansie?"

Jansie looked sheepish, "Well, I didn't think so at first and maybe I didn't want them to get it. I still ain't interested for me, but," she added defensively, "I reckon I've been counting on it to help pull you out of this bad time, Chrissie."

Chris shrugged and her thin face was sober, "Well, now that it has failed us," she said quietly, "and the way it's beginning to look as if I weren't going to get a school, after all, what do you think I'd better do, Jansie?"

Jansie looked at the tired, white face, the tumbled, dark curls, the too-thin body before her on the bed, "You had better get out, honey," her voice was gentle on the harsh words, "You'd better get clean away from anybody who ever heard of us Sanders, and start over."

"You mean," Chris' eyes were dark with her thoughts, "You mean—wash my hands of—of my own people, never come home?"

Jansie nodded quietly, "That's what I mean," she admitted, "Get away, take your own Paw's name, Sanders ain't really your name, anyway, and get a new start in life. We'll always be a drag on you, Chris."

Chris lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. For a long moment, the peace of the day lay clean in the small, shabby room, and a tentative breeze touched the white curtains at the windows and lifted the scent of Jansie's petunias into the room. Jansie watched the quiet, white face against the pillow, and there was no bitterness in her dark eyes, only love and pity and—understanding.

"Did you ever stop to think," Chris' voice came out at last, but her eyes were still closed, "Did it ever occur to you, Jansie, that Sanders is the only name I've ever really had?"

"Why, yes—" Jansie's voice was puzzled, "I reckon that's right, but I can't see what it has to do with—"

"Did you ever think," Chris went on in that still, too-quiet voice, "Did it ever dawn on you, Jansie Sanders," she sat up and opening her eyes, stared at the crippled woman almost

angrily, "What would have happened to me that Christmas night, if it hadn't been for the trashy Sanders family?"

Jansie shifted uncomfortably, "Of course," she said matter-of-factly, "I know you appreciate it, but—" her eyes dropped and she studied her long hands, "That ain't the question."

Chris went on as if there had been no interruption, "And all the years of scrimping and working and managing to keep me in school, of loving me and watching over me. I guess they don't come into it, either, Jansie?"

Jansie's head came up and strange tears lay unnoticed against her face, "I reckon you was worth it, honey," she said softly, "I reckon just loving you and having you around the place was enough to pay us back, and running over!"

Chris stood up and straightened her shoulders as if some restraining burden were falling away, "Jansie," she walked up and down the little room with long steps, "I'm not going away! I'm not going to run and hide and sneak and change my name!" She turned to regard the crippled woman with a deepened glance, "I'm staying here and—and—face the whole bunch of them. I'll get a job of some kind. If they won't let me teach, I'll get a job in the dime store or as a waitress," she paused beside Jansie and stuck out a slender foot, "Goodness knows, I may be Joe Sanders' sister, but I've got nice legs. That ought to get me tips!"

And she laughed aloud as she watched the slow red of disapproval rise in Jansie's dark face, "Oh, Jansie," she knelt beside the chair and hugged the bent form against her. "I was just teasing. What I meant was, I'll get by, and—" her voice deepened, "I'll do it right here in Collins as Chris Sanders."

But Chris got a school, after all.

After her decision to stay in Collins, she seemed to gain physical strength, and each day found her more like herself. Jansie watched the transformation with delight and with something very near apprehension. Chris had given up her efforts to find a school for that year, and was helping around the place with the garden and the chickens, getting along

cheerfully with R. P. and Willie. "I'll get a little stronger," she told Jansie, "then, this fall, I'll start making the rounds for jobs. I'll get *something*. And it won't hurt to let them cool off a little before I apply."

Jansie sighed with concern and anxiety for the girl.

So, it was almost with a sense of unreality that they heard the message of the wiry, back-country farmer who came, one morning, to talk to Chris. "My name's Carpenter, Miss Sanders," he told her, but his quick dark eyes did not quite meet hers, "We're a-needing a teacher for this next year out at Belling school, and we're wondering if you want the job. We ain't got so much to offer as some, but such as it is, it's yours if you want it."

"Why—of course!" Chris' tone was hesitant with amazement, "Of course I want it! And where," she asked, "is Belling school?"

"Belling's ten miles back between Dowell and Cain," the man named two small towns at the extreme edge of the big county, "We've talked it over, me and Jim Mains, him being the rest of the school board, and we decided to offer it to you," he shifted his hat back and forth between nervous fingers, "The pay is ninety dollars a month, and we hope to have eight-nine months this year."

"Why, that's wonderful!" Chris tried to keep her puzzlement out of her voice, "Where would I board?"

"I reckon you'd stay at our place," the man's tone was diffident, "It's near the school, right across a field."

When he had gone, Jansie and Chris stared at each other, "What's the catch, Jansie?" Chris demanded fiercely, "It's too good to be true!"

Jansie's dark eyes were serene, "I reckon the Lord took a hand in it, Chrissie," she said softly, "I reckon it's just the answer to our prayers."

"Just the same," Chris' eyes were thoughtful, "I'd like to know just what method the Lord used to get them to offer a school to Joe Sanders' sister."

"Here's where the pavement ends, Lady," the taxi driver from Cain drew his worn flivver to a stop and turned to regard Chris, "I reckon you'll be able to walk the rest of the way, all right. Belling schoolhouse is just a quarter mile down that there lane," he pointed a finger toward the deep-rutted country road that disappeared through scrub-oaked pastureland, "I can't risk getting stuck, so I can't carry you no further. Might be hours getting out."

Chris sat for a moment, looking about her, "Are you sure the school is right down the road?" she asked, "I wouldn't want to get lost."

"Oh yes, Ma'am," he assured her, and he was already taking her bag from the back seat, ready to set it by the roadside, "I'd take you right on in to it in good weather, but the rains this past week has just about closed these back country roads. Where you going to stay, the Carpenters?" his tone was friendly.

"I think so," Chris answered, "They live right near the school, don't they?"

"Yep," the man shouted above the roar of his starting motor, "You can't miss it. First mail-box on the right after you pass the school building. Well, so long!"

And so it was that Chris came to her school, walking in the muddy road and carrying her suitcase. But her eyes were eager for the first sight of the building, and when she came upon it, around a wide curve in the lane, just as the taxi driver had said, she stopped and stood, studying it in the bright, late sunlight of the autumn afternoon.

It's not so bad, she thought quietly, and rubbed her arm to relieve the ache, *a little in need of repair, maybe*. But as good a building as many another in which she had yearned to teach during those weeks of searching for a job.

It stood, as did so many of the country school buildings, on a slight rise in the ground, its broken windows and peeling door gazing out over the surrounding fields and scrub-oak pastures with an expression almost human. Across the field to the right, where last summer's cornstalks drearily scratched their leaves with a tired whispering, she could see the beaten

yard and unpainted buildings of a farm, and she guessed it to be the Carpenter house. A well-beaten path led from the schoolhouse door to the stile by the Carpenter fence.

In spite of the nearness of the farm, the school seemed inexplicably solitary. None of the scrubby trees had been cut in its yard and it stood, like some worn woman, still faintly pretty but strangely pathetic in an out-of-fashion skirt, in its own little grove. Busy life, civilization itself, seemed far away. Only the scrub-oak woods, the wide sky and the questing breeze about the neglected building seemed left in all the endlessness of a lonely world.

Chris shivered involuntarily, *I wonder why it seems so sort of forlorn*, she thought with a queer sense of timelessness and space, *there's no real reason for it*. But even as she reassured herself with sensible observations, her thoughts groped for the comforting memory of the paved highway not too far away and the gregarious swish of its traffic.

She turned abruptly and hurried toward the Carpenters' stile. *I'll come back and look inside*, she promised herself with a defensive thought, *when there is someone with me*.

Mrs. Carpenter greeted her with the strained loquaciousness of the country woman who struggles between the immovable barrier of natural reticence and the irresistible force of the need to talk to someone, just anyone, "Come in, come in, Miss Sanders," she wiped hard, quick hands on a wash-greyed apron and regarded Chris with birdlike brown eyes. "We've been expecting you. I told Tate this morning that you oughter be here sometime today, what with school starting Monday." She smoothed the tightly twisted roll of her dim-brown hair and peered past Chris' shoulder through the door behind her, "Who brought you?" she asked eagerly, "I never heard a thing."

"Nobody," Chris glanced back at the rutted muck of the lane in front of the house, "I walked from the highway and cut across the schoolyard and field to your stile."

"Too bad Tate didn't come by from town in time to give you a lift," Mrs. Carpenter led the way across the front room, with its wide double bed in one corner, toward an open door

beyond, "Here's your room, Miss Sanders. It's not half clean the way I'd a-liked, but—"

Chris smiled away the careful apologies, and going into the room, set her bag on the floor and looked about her. The other woman stood in the doorway, watching with narrowed eyes. *I wonder how old she is*, Chris thought irrelevantly as her eyes absently took in the peeling paint of the white iron bedstead and the limp sagging of its spring that was only half concealed by the bright newness of a pieced quilt. *Somehow, she seems younger than she looks*. Limp remnants of shade hung at the windows, and the gray floorboards were bare. Beyond, through an open doorway at one side, she could see what seemed to be the kitchen.

"It ain't so much," Mrs. Carpenter said formally.

"It's as good as I have at home," Chris said honestly.

The waiting look left Mrs. Carpenter's face, and she came a few more steps into the room, "Tate said you was just folks," she said to Chris, apropos of nothing at all.

"Why, how lovely!" Chris' eyes were caught by the glow of a small bouquet of late yellow tea-roses in a peanut butter glass on the window sill, "Who brought me such a sweet bouquet?"

"Jerry picked them," Mrs. Tate's face unbent a bit more, "He's our boy. He'll be in the fifth grade next year, Miss Sanders."

Chris picked up the glass of flowers and stood looking at it, "I'd rather you'd call me 'Chris' please, Mrs. Carpenter," she said quietly.

"Chris, then," Mrs. Carpenter was pleased, "That is, if you'll call me 'Molly'."

And Chris wondered again how old the woman was. The twisted hair and work-hardened hands looked middle-aged, but the brown, eager eyes were those of a girl in her twenties.

She occupied herself until the family suppertime with unpacking her clothes and getting the drab little room as livable as possible. Molly Carpenter called out a running chatter of trivialities from the kitchen, where she was clanging the heavy iron cooking pans about with cheerful abandon. "You'll

find the school in pretty bad shape," she called to Chris, "Them Hitchens boys has broke out half the windows since school was out last spring."

Chris hung the last of her scant wardrobe onto the hooks behind the door, "Yes, I noticed," she called back, "I looked at the schoolhouse as I went by." And as she spoke, a new wave of the lonely depression that had possessed her in that moment that she had looked at the building, came over her again. "Did you have a good school year last year?" she called, making conversation.

"Pretty good," Molly answered, and even though she could not see the other woman, Chris knew that a curtain had dropped between them. *Now, what did that other teacher do?* she wondered wryly, *that they're down on her?*

Presently, Tate Carpenter came in, his heavy shoes loud on the floor of the little hallway to the kitchen. He did not glance into Chris' room as he passed her open door. He was followed by a tall, loutish fellow in dirty jeans, whom he was presently to introduce as Hap Volney. Chris gathered that he was the hired man.

The men were loudly jovial in the kitchen, and Molly's self-conscious, squealing laughter gave punctuation to their remarks.

When she had finished with her unpacking, Chris sat for a few moments on the edge of the bed, watching twilight come into the little room. A sense of strangeness, of homesickness, came over her, but she shook off the mood with impatience, *I'd better not get homesick now*, she reminded herself, *not after wanting a school so badly!*

She got up and went into the kitchen.

A long table had been pulled into the center of the room, and on its oil-clothed surface heavy white dishes were placed in careful order, the plates upside down. Molly Carpenter was pouring pinto beans from an iron pot into a big bowl, and several plates of hot soda biscuits and fried salt pork were already on the table. Coffee boiled aromatically in the blackened coffeepot on the back of the stove.

And it was all so familiar! Suddenly, the months at Holden, the world of careful napery and dainty food, were a half-forgotten dream, and Chris Sanders was back among familiar things.

She smiled uncertainly in response to the stares of the men, and went toward the chair to which Molly motioned her.

Then, she saw the boy. He occupied the corner behind the table, his slender, young hands quiet beside his plate.

"Hello," Chris smiled in surprise, "I didn't see you before. You must be Jerry."

The boy nodded shyly, and ducked his tousled blonde head to hide a quick, darting smile.

Chris took the chair next to the child and Molly looked pleased, "There now, Jerry," she said, "Teacher wants to sit by you."

The men guffawed, and the boy blushed furiously.

Chris turned away, saying nothing more, lest she invite more embarrassing attention for him, and accepted one of the piled plates of biscuits.

There was no butter and no cream for the coffee.

"It ain't much," Tate Carpenter said on the accepted code of courtesy, "But such as it is, there's plenty of it!"

Presently, under cover of the talk about the table, Chris turned to Jerry.

"Do you like school?" she asked the little boy, and her voice was soft to keep the others from noticing, "Did you enjoy it last year?"

Jerry swiped his biscuit into the pot liquor from his beans and took a deliberate bite before answering, but Chris had no sense that he was being rude, rather that he was giving her question the careful thought that it deserved, "Yes, Ma'am," he said slowly, and she noted the singular sweetness of his voice tones, "I reckon I do like school. But I'd of liked it better if teacher hadn't of had to do so much whopping."

"Whipping?" Chris asked, "Did she have to whip you, Jerry?"

The blue eyes that turned up to hers were candid, "Oh, no Ma'am," Jerry said seriously, "But," his solemn young

face was thoughtful, "Ever'time we got any good time, I mean pretty good time, somebody had to go and ruin it. They'd go and do something mean and she'd have to whop them."

"Good times?" Chris asked, "You mean games and things?"

"Well, yes'm," he agreed, "Them, of course. But I meant things like painting and singing songs, things like that—"

"Do you like to paint and sing?" Chris asked.

Jerry nodded, "Yes Ma'am," he said firmly, "I sure do."

"It was mostly them Hitchens young-uns and that bunch that made trouble," Molly Carpenter put in from across the table, though Chris had not been aware that she had been listening, "Ain't no teacher been able to manage them yet."

"I see," Chris said quietly.



25

So this, Chris thought with something like excitement within her, was to be her school. She looked at the assorted faces upturned to her from the rows of battered desks, and wondered what was going on behind their bland acceptance of expression. *What do they expect?* she asked herself. *What do they think of me? Are they comparing me unfavorably with last year's teacher?* As far as she was able to tell, they evidently expected nothing at all!

There were a dozen of them, accumulated from the scrubby farms that made up the Belling community. Three little Hamner girls, so much alike as to seem to be triplets, and even their names queerly similar. To the end of her stay at Belling, Chris was to catch herself calling Jewel, Opal, and Opal, Pearl! They were that kind of little girls.

Then, there were the two clean, German-looking Schultz boys, Lennie and Ed, in their well-ironed overalls. There was the wise-eyed, too-old-for-school-looking Martin girl, Velma, and her somewhat henpecked younger brother, Jimmie.

I hope that I don't have trouble with that girl, Chris thought in passing, her eyes held for a moment by the sly, side glances of the girl's eyes. *She looks shifty, and none too honest!*

There was Jerry, of course, looking shy and a little proprietary because of his advantage of having known the teacher two extra days. And last, but certainly not the least important, there were the Hitchens, all four of them, ranging from Lafe, whose bright, hard eyes topped Chris' own by a good two inches, down through Ran and Art, the slightly younger but no less dismaying twins, to little Em, the baby of the family, who was seven and the one first-grade pupil.

And the Hitchens dominated the school with hard, gnarled, and very dirty hands. Even the bland faces of the Schultz boys, even the darting slynesses of Velma Martin, were subject to that control. Chris saw it from the first moment that she stood up, preparing to write the planned schedules of the classes on the blackboard. *No wonder that other teacher had trouble,* she thought with a growing dread, *If they don't choose to obey me, I'll have nothing but trouble!*

She stood, chalk in hand, surveying the studiously bent heads above the state-issued textbooks. *It all depends on the Hitchens,* she thought grimly. *If I can manage them, youngsters like Jerry can get something out of school!*

For she was thinking of the day before, when, in the long boredom of Sunday in a new place, she had groped for topics of conversation. "Jerry says that he likes painting, Mrs. Carpenter," she had suggested as they had been sitting, all of them, in the after-dinner lingering of the holiday. "Maybe he'd like to show me some of his drawings from last year's school work?"

And Molly Carpenter had pushed back her chair to go into her own room, from which she had reappeared with a magazine in her hand. "Here's some of his paintings, Miss Sanders," She had pulled several sheets of cheap drawing paper from between the magazine pages, to lay them on the table in front of Chris and the men. "He done these here at home, just for fun! Miss Ollie, the teacher here last year, said they was awful good." There had been a shy, doubtful

pride in her voice, as she had added, deprecatingly, "but we think he ain't doing them neat enough!"

Chris had looked at the awkward effectiveness of the splashy efforts. "Well!" and her eyes had been held by them in spite of herself, "They certainly seem to be—original!"

Molly Carpenter had spread the pages out before Chris, and the men, dropping their conversation, had watched the teacher.

"That's a bird, isn't it?" Chris had pointed to one of the less obscure efforts. "Weren't you painting a bird, Jerry?"

The little boy had looked pleased. "Yes'm."

Mrs. Carpenter had snorted, "Humph!" but her eyes had been pleased. "I'm glad somebody can figure it out. It had us guessing for days."

But as Chris' eyes had become accustomed to the thing, even as her mind, seeking details, had lost the image in bewilderment, there had been within her that first impression of flight—of freedom.

"Let me see another." She had picked up a second sheet. "What's this one?"

"See now, Jerry," Molly had told her child, "even teacher can't tell what that one is supposed to be." She had turned back to Chris. "He gits them stubborn streaks, and he won't tell us."

Chris had studied the smears across the page, "I think I can tell what it is, though," she had said, partly in truth and partly to make it easier for the boy. "Isn't it the schoolhouse?"

Jerry had nodded eagerly. "That's right." And he had looked at his mother with a shy triumph in his face. "It is the schoolhouse. I done it one night when I went after Jenny, just before sundown."

"Jenny's our cow," Molly Carpenter had explained hastily, and Chris had felt her need to change the subject, to get back to the tangible. "She'll be fresh in a couple of months."

But even as she had allowed the subject to be changed, Chris had been realizing the reason for her recognition of the subject of the childish drawing. Out of the smears and im-

mature lines of Jerry's picture, she had caught some breath of that brooding loneliness, that hopeless solitariness, that had been her first impression of Belling school.

In spite of her apprehensions about the Hitchens boys, the first day wore on uneventfully. Lafe and the twins were docile enough, and if Lafe's queer eyes glowed now and then with an unholy speculation, he did nothing that could be said to be designed to make trouble. Little Em sniffed through the first page of the first reader, and the Schultz boys, the Hamner girls, and Jerry bounced into the intricacies of the fifth grade. Jimmie Martin was in the third, and nominally at least, Velma and the older boys were ready for the seventh reader. Chris discovered, long before the first day was done, that Velma could not read, but, strangely enough, that Lafe and the twins were fluent readers!

All in all, she decided wearily, as she looked at the loudly ticking alarm clock on her desk and saw that it was time to dismiss school, it hadn't been too bad a day. The children hadn't learned much, maybe, but it had all been new and they had made a start.

And she realized, as she locked the schoolhouse door behind the last lingering pupil, that not once, throughout the whole awkward but amazingly busy time, had she thought about Jack!

"How're you making it with them Hitchens boys, teacher?" Tate Carpenter asked one evening when school had been going on for a month. "They making trouble yet?"

Chris raised her eyes from the letter she was writing to Carl. The whole family sat in the Capenters' bedroom, sharing the warmth of the fire in the wood-burning heater and the common light of the lamp on the round table at which Chris was sitting. There was no stove in Chris' own room, and the evenings were growing colder. "Well enough," she answered Tate's question. "They're doing all right."

Tate said nothing further, but Chris caught a glance of some private understanding between the school board member and his hired man.

"There's one thing that worries me, though," she chose to ignore the look, "That little Hitchens girl, Emmy, always has a cold."

Molly Carpenter nodded above her crochet work. "That's right," she agreed. "She's just like Minnie, her Maw. Minnie ain't had a well day in five years."

"Likely consumption," Hap Volney remarked, and leaning over thrust another oak chunk into the fire. "Seen her spit blood myself!"

"But the child ought to have attention, even if she has only a suspicion of T.B." Chris' voice was distressed. "It ought to be seen to!"

Nobody said anything. Mollie went on rocking and counting her stitches, and the men refused to meet Chris' eyes.

"I believe I'd better go to see Emmy's mother," Chris went on, and her voice fell heavily into the silence, "I'll walk over there some afternoon after school."

Only Jerry's eyes met hers, as he raised them from his arithmetic.

Nobody else answered at all.

And presently, bewildered, Chris went back to her letter, "There's something here that I can't understand, Carl—" she wrote, "Something about the Hitchens family."

But she went to see Mrs. Hitchens. Little Emmy's endless sniffing drove her to it.

She walked down the road to their house one warm afternoon in early December, accompanied by Emmy. The boys had long ago run whooping ahead, to disappear down the curves of the sandy lane.

They didn't talk much, the teacher and the little girl, as they walked along in comfortable silence in the late sunlight. Only Emmy's snuffle punctuated the contented quiet. *She's not too bright*, Chris thought gently, *probably sick half the*

time, really miserable, and doesn't even realize it herself, poor little tyke!

When, presently, they came around one of the long curves and caught sight of the Hitchens house, Chris saw that it was a sort of half cabin, partly of logs and partly of boards, weathered by time. It looked substantial enough, but very old, and not too comfortable.

Three great dogs came bounding out to them, but seeing Emmy, they subsided, eyeing Chris with vicious, half-hungry looks. "Them's old Spot and Gray and Red," Emmy told her in a proud voice. "Them's Paw's coon dogs."

At the sound of their arrival, the cabin door opened, and Mrs. Hitchens looked out at them. At the sight of the emaciated face, Chris realized that it was just as she had been told. The woman was evidently in the last stages of mortal illness. The skin of her face was stretched and taut, with slitlike openings for her too-bright eyes. She seemed faintly surprised to see the teacher, and called to the dogs in a faded, scolding voice. "Don't pay no attention to them, Miss," she said, and coughed. "They act mean, but they won't bite you when you're with Emmy."

She stood with the door half open, her weary eyes straining out at them.

"May I come in, Mrs. Hitchens?" Chris asked. "I'm Emmy's teacher, and—" she looked about, but the little girl had disappeared, "I want to talk to you about her."

Whereupon the door came reluctantly wider.

Chris tried not to notice the mingled odors of filth and illness that came to her from all corners of the big room as she stepped inside the door. Like the Carpenters' main room, it was a bedroom, but instead of the usual stove, a great rock fireplace on one side held blazing logs. Several rawhide-stripped chairs were set about the well-worn rocks of the hearth. "Set down, teacher," Mrs. Hitchens invited in little more than a whisper.

Chris sat down and stated her errand. "— and so," she concluded, "I think Emmy should have a T.B. test, Mrs. Hitchens. I am sure there must be funds available in the county for the

purpose. I can at least talk to the County Superintendent about it."

When she had finished, Mrs. Hitchens sat for a long time in silence, and presently, she raised her hand and drew trembling fingers across her parchment cheek. Chris was surprised to realize that she was crying.

"I been thinking a lot about little Emmy, teacher," the sick woman said at last. "I ain't very long for this life, now, and I been worrying about little Emmy."

Chris groped for words. But the woman went on, as if speaking out of some inner compulsion of her own. "You going to stay here long, teacher?" Mrs. Hitchens asked.

"Why, I — I hadn't thought much about it, either way," Chris wondered what this had to do with Emmy's T.B. test. "I don't know whether I'll be able to make good here or not and—"

"Them big boys of ourn always runs off all the teachers," the woman said simply.

Chris stared at the trembling hand that covered the thin face. "Well," she said, uncertain as to what she was expected to say. "I haven't had any trouble with them so far and—"

The hand came down from the face, and tears lay on the cheeks, but there was around the eyes a faint suggestion of an amused smile. "You won't have no trouble, Miss Sanders," Mrs. Hitchens assured her. "They won't give you no trouble!"

"Well," Chris laughed a little in puzzlement, "I hope not. And now," she stood up. "I have your permission to talk to the County Superintendent about Emmy?"

The woman smiled again, a soft smile, gentle and tender. "You do what you can for little Emmy, Miss," she said quietly, "And God bless you!"

Outside, in the late afternoon sunlight, Chris hesitated and looked about her. Little Emmy peeped around a corner of the house. "Isn't there some shorter way I can get back to the school, Emmy?" Chris called to the child. "Could I cut through those woods there?" She nodded toward a well-beaten path that angled off from the road and disappeared into an

unusually heavy growth of scrub. "Haven't I seen you and the boys come out of those woods to the school?"

Emmy sniffed loudly and looked worried, wiping her fist across her nose. But she nodded.

Chris waved again to the child and turned aside into the short cut.

Why is it, she thought as she walked along the wide, well-used path between and under the trees, *that even winter is sweeter in the woods?* You'd think that brownness and bare trees would be ugly, the gruesome reminders of beauty that had died. But it wasn't that way at all. Even beauty that had suffered, even beauty that had bowed its head to time, was lovelier than no beauty at all!

She looked up through the interlacing branches of an unusually tall oak, at the still paleness of the late afternoon sky, and suddenly, she was happy again. There came, in a rush, bursting out of the quietness of acceptance of these past months, joy full-fledged.

She stopped, looking up, and her heart quickened to the magic rejuvenation of life. *Why*, she thought with a wondering certainty, *I'm not going to die of losing Jack, after all. I'll go right on living, and — and —* her heart admitted it with a new, shy candor, *tomorrow and all the days after, I'll be seeing beauty like this, and maybe—*

And presently, when the hard-beaten path had brought her out of the woods near the schoolhouse, she went across the field to the Carpenters, and there was a small, saucy whistle of contentment on her lips!



26

BUT Chris discovered, when she went on the bus to the county seat, in February, that there was no fund for little girls with suspicious lungs after all.

Mr. Hartwell, the County Superintendent, regarded her with approving eyes, but his answer was, none the less, discouraging. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Miss Sanders," he assured her, and for a moment his mild, old eyes were brooding, "There should be such a fund in this county, and we hope, in time, to have it, but now, no, I'm afraid not."

Chris sat across the big desk from him and her hands were troubled on her purse, "I don't know why I was so sure that there was such a fund, Mr. Hartwell," she admitted ruefully, "I suppose that it's just that I've read that some states and some schools have made provision for fighting such things as T.B." She stood up, "I'm sorry to have bothered you about it, and, well — I hate to go back and tell Emmy's mother about it."

The Superintendent stood up with her, watching with the approving eyes of a good old man as she tucked a dark curl back under her hat.

"You're looking better, Miss Sanders," he told her with gentle courtesy, "And if you won't think I'm impertinent, prettier! You've picked up a little weight, and I'm glad to see you not so thin as when you first came to ask me about schools."

Chris smiled up at him, "I am stronger," she said, and inside herself, she was reflecting that it was fun to be flattered a little again. "I guess the country food agrees with me."

"How are you getting along with Belling school?" the Superintendent studied her with interested eyes, "I've had no complaints from either teacher or patrons, which is unprecedented for that school."

"I'm happy there," Chris told him in a serious tone, "I was glad to get the job, Mr. Hartwell. It looked as if I weren't going to get one at all there for awhile." She turned to the door.

He smiled reassuringly down at her as he held open the door of his office. "You'll be able to get a better one next year, I feel sure, Miss Sanders. I'll be happy to give you a fine recommendation to one of the better boards. You're going back to college this next summer and put in some more work on your certificate, I suppose?"

Chris nodded as she turned away to go down the hall, "I hope to," she told him, "I plan to go back to Holden."

Mr. Hartwell watched her from the doorway of his office as she walked away.

It was hard to watch the hope die in Mrs. Hitchens' face as she reported the disappointing result of the trip. "But I have an idea, Mrs. Hitchens," Chris added quickly, feeling that she was almost responsible for the illness-faded eyes across the rock hearth, "I want to take Emmy to town, to Cain, sometime soon and have her lungs x-rayed myself, at my own expense. I won't be satisfied until I do!" she smiled, trying to make the offer sound casual.

Mrs. Hitchens smiled in gentle answer, "That's mighty sweet of you, Miss Sanders," she said in her weary voice, "But you ain't beholden to take care of my children, just because you're their teacher."

"But I want to!" Chris said fiercely, "It isn't right for Emmy to go on and on this way. Will you let me take her to a doctor?"

The sick woman sighed, "Of course," she agreed almost casually, "You do whatever you think is best, Miss Sanders. I'll settle it with her paw. He ain't much for doctors and such since his sister Lennie died in a state hospital, but—" and the stretched skin that was her eyelids drooped over the pale eyes, "I'll get him to be willing."

"I'll make arrangements, then," Chris stood up and moved toward the door, "I'll let you know." And as she went out the door, she wondered if the woman had even heard her through the mist of tenuous, fading life that seemed to lie between them, the well woman and the sick one.

She turned toward the now-familiar path through the trees and her thoughts were busy with the plans for getting little Emmy x-rayed.

"Whur do you think you're a-going, Miss?" a voice snarled almost at her elbow.

Chris started violently and fright coursed through her in an instinctive wave. She turned to find a stubble-faced old man regarding her with baleful eyes, "Whur you think you're a-going?" he demanded again, and his voice shook frighteningly on the final inflection. "Down that there path?" He gestured with the rifle in the crook of his arm.

Chris turned to regard the familiar pathway with puzzled eyes, "Why, yes," she admitted uncertainly, "I — I was just taking a short cut to the schoolhouse—"

"What's yore name?" demanded the old man.

"I'm Miss Sanders, the school teacher," Chris felt impelled to answer, "I came here to see Mrs. Hitchens. Are you one of the Hitchens family?"

Before the old man could answer, if indeed he was going to answer, one of the twins, she thought it was Ran, came

around the corner of the house. He paused at the sight of the tableau in the pathway, then gave a shout of dismay, "Hey! Uncle Steve!" he ran toward them, "That's the teacher! You ain't bothering her, are you?"

The old man turned, not at all convinced, "Why shouldn't I bother the teacher?" he snarled, "She was a-going down that there path — snooping!"

Ran looked embarrassed, "Oh no, Uncle Steve," he said hastily, "She goes down that path all the time! It's all right!" he turned to Chris, "Uncle Steve ain't been here long," he explained, "He just come here last week, Miss Sanders."

Chris was puzzled but relieved to have an ally, "I see," she said, then added, "But I'll go around by the road, if it isn't all right to cut through."

Ran eyed his uncle, "Paw says to let her alone, Uncle Steve."

Very reluctantly, the old man stepped back to let her go by in the pathway. And Chris, not knowing what else to do, went on. The old man and the boy stood, watching her in silence as she went under the trees and she could feel their eyes upon her back as she walked.

"You see, she ain't just the teacher, Uncle Steve," the boy's loud whisper carried to her even as she widened the distance between them, "She's Joe Sanders' sister!"

So that's it! Chris almost stumbled in the hard beaten pathway, that's the reason they've let me stay and haven't made trouble! Just because I'm Joe's sister!

And as she walked along the familiar and now strangely sinister path, she saw the long shadows of the scrub-oaks lying across many footprints, footprints that turned from the pathway into the depths of the woods, and once, looking fearfully through the trees, she was sure that she caught the bright glint of copper!

I'll never come this way again, she thought in panic, and resisted the desire to run. I may be Joe's sister, but I certainly don't want to know where their old still is hidden!

It was with a deep relief that, when she came out of the path into the area near the school, she saw Jerry Carpenter waiting for her near the stile beyond the cornfield, "Hello,

Miss Sanders," he said as she came up, and his eyes were bright with some secret of his own, "I been waiting for you."

"That's fine," Chris paused for a moment to lean against the stile, and she was surprised to realize how breathless she was, "I — I'm glad that you did wait, Jerry."

"Shhhhhhh!" Jerry said suddenly.

Chris jumped and looked over her shoulder.

"Can you keep a secret?" the little boy demanded, his eyes serious.

"Yes," Chris answered wryly, "I — I certainly hope so!"

"Come on, then," Jerry looked around, then led the way to the yellow rosebush, now dry and bare with the harshness of winter, but still in its barrenness, an unkempt cluster, "I don't want nobody but you seeing this, Miss Sanders," he whispered. "I'm gonna paint me a picture of it."

As he spoke, he pulled aside the curtaining sharp branches and pointed. There, half sheltered by the brambly thicket, out of season and out of its proper habitat, she saw the delicate flower of a tiny wood-violet.

And Jerry looked on in surprise and some chagrin, as his teacher leaned suddenly against a fence post and laughed, half in mirth and half in tears, but certainly a little hysterically!

So little Emmy went to town with the teacher, very proud in a starched print dress and with her shoes blacked to a painful smudginess. Mrs. Hitchens saw them off for the bus with such an unusual burst of energy that she went all the way to the front steps of the cabin. "You be good for the teacher now, Emmy," she admonished with frail sternness, "And don't you raise no howl!"

But little Emmy was far too impressed by the glittering neatness of the doctor's office to make a sound, much less raise anything so drastic as a howl.

"I'll let you know the results of the x-rays, Miss Sanders," the doctor told Chris, when little Emmy, having been thoroughly photographed, was sitting once more in the front office. "I imagine that under the living conditions you have described, some trouble will show up. Maybe not though,"

he sighed and tapped his glasses against his long fingers. "Sometimes these youngsters develop a surprising amount of resistance."

"Well, thank you, Doctor Brooke." Chris stood up and turned toward the outer office, "I'll leave my address with your nurse and she can write me what you find," she smiled. "And I am still hoping that the verdict will be good."

Doctor Brooke smiled again and unwound his length to escort her to his door, "That's right," he agreed, frowning, "But even if the child doesn't have it now, the conditions are still there. I wish," he said half to himself, "That we could really do something about these cases now and then. I appreciate your interest as a teacher, Miss Sanders, and—" he grinned, "There won't be any charge for — what's her name, little Emmy?"

"Oh no," Chris' voice held her surprise, "I couldn't let you do that. I wanted to have this done, myself, and—"

But the doctor shoved her through the door with a gentle push, "Shhh," he said firmly, "Not a word out of you, young lady. I've been wanting to get a crack at some of these back-country kids for a long time. You just say no more about it!"

Chris and little Emmy ate a thoroughly gala lunch in a restaurant and took the next bus back to Belling community.

But physical illness was not the only symptom that she found through those months of winter and early spring.

It was during a fifth grade spelling lesson one day, when she detected a furtive exchange between Velma Martin and Lafe Hitchens. Chris hesitated for a moment before calling the girl up to the desk, wondering briefly if she should spare herself the trouble of reprimanding her. It would be so easy to just not see, but her sense of responsibility won. "What's that in your hand, Velma?" she asked, and the normal buzz of the schoolroom died to the awful silence of impending trouble, "Bring it to the desk, please."

Half sullen and half pleased to be the center of attention, Velma shuffled her knowing overgrownness to the desk and laid before Chris, to the teacher's surprise, an ordinary tobacco can.

She picked it up and looked into it, and there was a suppressed giggle from the older pupils. It was empty.

"Why did Lafe slip this to you?" she asked Velma in a puzzled voice.

Velma answered only with red-faced snickers.

Chris sat looking at the can, turning it in her hand, knowing that some vulgar significance lay in it for the children and wondering how to cope with something that she could not see.

Then, she noticed that part of the words in the printed-on label on the back of the can had been scratched out with some sharp tool, leaving only the shining metal underneath. She sat, instinctively reading the remaining words, and it was some seconds before the exceedingly pornographic import of their message got through to her. When it did, she dropped the can on her desk and looked up, to meet Lafe's mocking eyes.

Her first reaction was one of amazement that one so young should have such an unnecessary knowledge of ugliness. Then, as the realization came to her that not only Lafe, but every child in the room, down to the youngest, knew exactly what was on the can, she found herself suddenly pressed for an attitude.

"Go to your seat, Velma," she said quietly. *If I refuse to pay any attention, she thought desperately, they'll think I'm condoning it. If I make too much of it, I'll be the laughingstock of the whole community.*

"Lafe, come here," she said slowly, feeling her way.

Lafe grinned loutishly and shuffled to the desk, every line of his big body impertinent, "What is it, Miss Sanders?" he asked, and his voice held a mocking tone.

"Take this can," Chris kept her voice noncommittal, "And throw it into the stove."

Lafe looked taken aback, but obeyed, slamming the stove door and brushing off his hands with a dramatic gesture. Then he turned, eager for the tirade that he expected.

But Chris was ostensibly absorbed in grading papers, her head bent above her work. "That will be all," she said in

an absent voice, "You may go to your seat, and we will go on with our spelling lesson."

Looking considerably deflated, Lafe went back to work.

And Chris reflected wryly that there was more than one kind of x-ray to see inside people!

Little Emmy's report came in March, accompanied by a long letter from the doctor, "There's a spot there, all right, Miss Sanders," he wrote, "Not a big one, but it's there. Isn't there some way you could get the family to arrange for proper care for the child? It's criminal to let her go on without attention."

Chris read the letter with a sick heart. Not much chance of getting little Emmy away from her home, nor of getting good care for her in it. There was always the matter of Paw Hitchens' sister who had died in the state sanatorium.

She took the letter to Mrs. Hitchens and read it to her, watching the tired eyes, "That's the way it is, Mrs. Hitchens," she finished and folded the letter back into her purse, "She needs special care and I don't know what can be done about it."

"I'll work on her Paw," Mrs. Hitchens said quietly, "And you just wait and do whatever seems best as it comes up, Miss Sanders."

The tired eyes closed for a long moment, then came open, their glance on Chris, "It wouldn't hurt none to pray for little Emmy," the sick woman said gently, "I ain't been raised to know very much about religion, but—" she paused, her voice hesitant and questioning.

Chris went cold with surprise and something very like fear. The woman was asking for spiritual help from her, Chris!

"Well, I don't know how to say such things very clearly, Mrs. Hitchens," she stammered a little on the words, "But I'll try to tell you about — about —" she gulped and came out with it, "about the plan of salvation!"

There it was, flatly between them, she thought, and took a deep breath to brace herself against a blast of derisive anger or even of laughter.

It did not come. Mrs. Hitchens merely looked at her and waited.

So, stumbling and ill at ease, Chris talked.

She told about her own conversion and Jansie's, and what they had meant. Then, very simply and quite awkwardly, she outlined the Way for Mrs. Hitchens.

"And so," she finished at last, "Although I'm afraid that I haven't said it very well, Mrs. Hitchens, I have told you what Jesus has meant to my life and to Jansie's. And — and — you, too—" she stopped, and just as Jansie had done that day last summer, she waited.

Mrs. Hitchens sighed and opened her eyes, "I do see," she said, and her voice was soft and sure. Then, "How could anyone refuse Him?"

Chris looked across at the serene light of acceptance on the weary face.

And such a mighty wind of joy went through her that it left her trembling in its wake.

She would never be so afraid again to talk to another human being about his soul.

After the episode of the tobacco can, Chris decided to spend more time in supervision of the playground. It was, as she explained to Carl in one of her frequent letters, necessary. "They are so unnaturally wise, Carl" she wrote, "They have all the animal wisdom of the ages in their poor little unsophisticated heads! I have been grading papers at recess, trying to catch up on that particularly endless job, but since the incident between Lafe and Velma, I don't dare leave them to their own devices."

So she made occasion to share the games and activities that went on outside during recesses and the long lunch-hour. As spring came on, she took to eating her lunch in the shade of the scrub-oaks on the school ground, trading dainties with the smaller girls, and discussing their affairs with all the children.

It was so that Jack found her one April morning at recess time, kneeling in the shade of a scrub-oak, engrossed in a game of mumbly-peg with several of the older children.

As the long car swung around the curve in the lane from town, the game paused to let the participants stare at its expensive shiningness. Chris stared with the rest, not recognizing the car, for it was not the one Jack had driven during their courtship. She was no less surprised than the children when it slowed and swung carefully into the shade at the edge of the schoolground.

She stood up from the game, and brushed off the knees of her skirt, then walked uncertainly toward the car to greet the visitor.

Her eyes darkened with hurt and surprise as she recognized the man in the driver's seat, but she walked on with the courtesy expected of the teacher toward any school visitor.

The children stood, staring, wondering who the man might be.

Jack climbed out from behind the wheel, his face uncertain and yet eager as he met her eyes, "Hello, honey," his voice was low against the curiosity of the staring children under the scrub-oaks, "Is this where you've buried yourself?"

"Hello, Jack," Chris smiled and waited, "How are you?"

"Listen, Chris," Jack mopped at his hot face with an immaculate handkerchief. Chris noticed that his clothes had lost their fine carelessness of the months ago, that they seemed to be more the apparel of an adult, less boyish in their good grooming. His eyes roved the schoolyard, took in the shabby building and the lonely location. "How do you stand it out here, anyway?" he demanded, "And teaching such scrubby little beggars, too!"

She stood before him, standing quietly for his verdict, even as she had done so often before. And as he spoke, she looked about her and for a moment, her sight was colored by the old magic that he had held for her, the old vividness with which his personality had splashed everything which they had shared. In that instant, there in the pitiless April light, she saw it all as he saw it, the underprivileged children, the ramshackle building, indescribably shabby indeed, a poor place to spend a life!

Then — “but how did you find me, Jack?” she asked, and before the words were out, she had her own answer. Jansie had told him how to find her! There could have been no other way.

If Jansie told him how to find me, she thought, it means that Jansie was sure that I'd decide right, whatever he has come to say. Jansie trusted her. She felt a sudden lift of pride. Jansie had given her this chance to make up her own mind. There was something of that thought in her voice as she asked, “Why have you come to see me, Jack? Were you just passing through and looked me up for old times sake?”

Jack took off his smart Homberg and mopped again at his hot face. Chris saw, with an almost impersonal clarity, that his blonde hair looked sleek and smooth, precise above his forehead, “Isn't there some place around this dump where we could be alone to talk, Chris?” he demanded irritably, “You don't expect me to speak my little piece with all those little gargoyles staring at us, do you?”

Chris looked at him, “I'm afraid this is as much privacy as we will be able to get this morning,” she told him without distress in her voice, “You see, this is their playtime, and I must supervise it. They aren't really much interested in adult conversation, anyway. As soon as they look you over a little, it will be all right.”

“But couldn't I see you later in the day or something,” Jack persisted, “Couldn't I come to your house tonight to see you?”

Chris shook her head, implacably, “No, I have only a bedroom. We all sit around the fire and the lamp together in the evenings. There just isn't any place to be alone here, I'm afraid, Jack.”

Jack looked slightly desperate, “Well, it's a funny time to say it, and a pretty queer place to say it in, but I still love you, Chris!”

Chris studied him with thoughtful hazel-green eyes. *Why do I feel exactly as if I had read this scene out of one of Annie's old love novels, she thought wryly, I feel almost as if I were Jansie! It's as if she were standing here listening to Jack.*

"But you're married to Vivian, Jack," she reminded him, "You haven't any real right to be saying that to me, now, have you?"

Jack flushed, "I haven't forgotten it, Chris," his voice grew bitter, "She sees to that. He paused, groping for words, "Look, Chris, Viv doesn't matter. Sometimes I think she is more married to Mother than to me, anyway, they both get so much fun out of it!" He paused again and Chris waited, not encouraging him to go on, but listening.

"Look, Chris," Jack ran a nervous finger around his collar, looking hot and miserable in his smart suit, "I love you, and I always will and I can't help it! I — I want to — to — have you and take care of you and —." He faltered into silence, watching her.

"You mean, Jack," Chris helped him, "You mean that you want me for a sort of — backdoor wife?"

"I love you, Chris," he insisted desperately. "You know that, don't you?" In that moment he looked like the boy she had loved so much.

"Yes," Chris looked away from him, "I do know it, Jack."

"And, honey," Jack's voice quickened with a subtle sensing of advantage, "I want to get you out of all this." His gesture took in the whole scene, the schoolyard with its scrubby oaks, the lonely building, the homely children, "I'll take you out of it tomorrow! Dad'll give me whatever I want now that I'm in with him and — now that I'm — doing things the way he wants them." He paused, feeling for the effect of his words as a man will test an unknown stream bed, "You know, sweet, of course, that Dad and Mother really wanted Viv, and I—"

Chris looked at him, "Yes," she said slowly, thoughtfully, "I know. You know, don't you, Jack, that your father sent me a check?"

Jack groaned, "Oh no, Chris!" but answered by the expression on her face, he added, grimly, "I'll make him pay for that!"

"I had to use it," Chris went on in an expressionless voice. "We were desperate for money for Joe's funeral, but I'm pay-

ing it back. I've sent him twenty-five dollars a month ever since I've had this job."

Jack looked sick, "Aw, Chris honey, how you must hate us Duncans! I'm sorry, honestly." He watched her with anxious eyes and added carefully, "Let me make it up to you." He reached out a passionate hand to press his advantage, then drew it back, thwarted, as he remembered the watching children.

Chris stood before him, not looking at him, and her eyes were on the ground. She was thinking. The moment hung, suspended and crystal, between them.

"Let me take you out of this sorry mess, sweet," Jack's whisper was tender, "I — I saw that dump in Collins where you've had to live all your life, and that hunchbacked girl who told me where to find you. Honey, they aren't even your own folks."

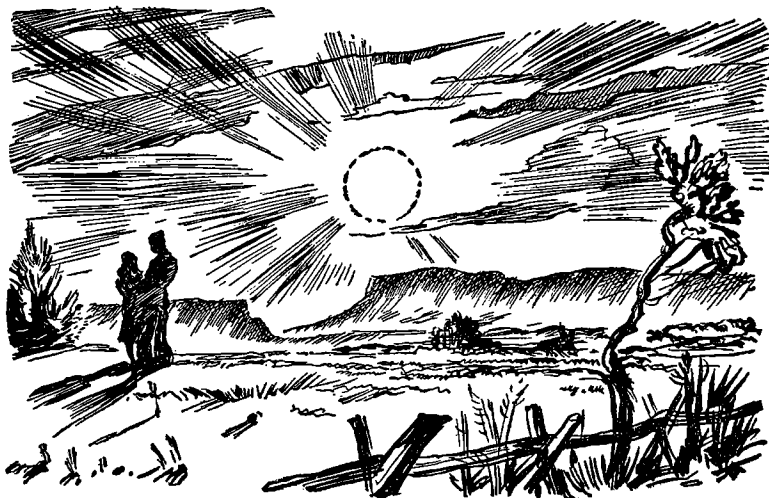
Chris' eyes came up. At the mention of her home, of Jansie and all the life they'd had together, it was as if Jansie herself had come to stand beside her there in the sunlight. She saw, in that moment, Jack as he would have looked through Jansie's eyes.

She saw that the boy she had loved was already faintly glazed over with the smoothness of self-indulgent wealth and too-rich living. Already the clean lines of his face and body were a little smeared by an evasiveness, an unwillingness to face hard reality. His faultless tailoring could not cover a blurred look, and the old, fine carelessness, the vivid strength, were already going. He was Vivian's man now, as Vivian wanted him, and his fine words of attempted seduction were faintly ridiculous.

"I suppose I ought to be angry, Jack," she said, and her eyes met his with a cool, new quietness, "It's pretty insulting, all of this! But I suppose, too, that it is a good part my own fault, so I shan't say anything more. Now, if you'll excuse me," she added matter-of-factly, "It's time to ring the bell."
~ ~ "Chris!" Jack could not believe his defeat, "I want you!
~ ~ Let me, — let me give you everything, honey! Everything!"

Chris looked at him, and the hazel-green eyes were quiet with a finality that was the more final because it was without anger, "No, Jack," she said gently, "I wouldn't expect you to understand, but it is the truth. I have had everything!"

Turning, she walked away, back to her work. And presently, the impatient roar of the expensive motor died away around the curves of the sandy road.



27

THERE was no denying it, Jansie decided as she looked out the kitchen window for the fortieth time that morning, they were working around that abandoned well again. She stood gazing at the unusual burst of activity with interested eyes, and reflected pleasantly upon the fact that the well, which had stood like some silent monument of failure all through the winter months, had come to life again on the very day that Chris was due to come home from her school. It must be some sort of sign, she thought foolishly, a sign of good luck or something like that for Chrissie.

When R. P. and Willie came in for lunch, the crippled woman questioned them about the activity. "They going to drill that well some more?" she asked R. P., "Or are they just carting away their stuff?"

"They're drilling again," the old man told her, but his attention was more for the great heap of beans on his plate than on the topic of the well, "They're going to try again for oil."

"My goodness!" Jansie's voice was pleased, "Wouldn't it be nice if they got a little oil!"

Willie grinned foolishly and R. P. went on eating. They had long ago lost any real interest in chimerical wealth. To Willie, money was only a matter of misty fancy, anyway, and R. P. was falling rapidly into senility.

Jansie looked at him and sighed. Sometimes, she felt that she'd simply die before Chrissie got home, she was so lonesome to talk to somebody with common sense. Willie was dumb as always and R. P. was getting so childish.

She picked a spring onion off the dish and sat, eating it and thinking, in a half day-dreaming way, of Chris' homecoming.

Someone knocked.

Paw and Willie looked up from their plates, and Jansie got up. She took off her apron and opened the door to the smithy steps.

Carl David stood at the top of the steps.

Jansie stared up at the tall young man in the gloom of the smithy, and surprise held her for a moment.

"Hello, Jansie," Carl bent his dark head to smile down at her, "Do you remember me? I'm Carl David."

Jansie recovered and snorted, "Of course, I remember you!" she told him, "Come in."

He came into the room, smiling at the old man and the foolish boy, and there was about him an air of easy gentleness.

Jansie closed the door behind him, and her face was thoughtful, "Won't you sit down?" she invited, "Have you had your dinner?"

Carl smiled, "Yes, I ate on the way out here. Chris wrote me that she'd be home today," he explained his presence.

Jansie's thoughts cleared, "Oh, I see. And how's your aunt?" she asked politely, motioning him to a chair.

"Oh, Aunt Ennie is fine!" Carl sat down and the two of them made casual conversation until the old man and the boy had finished eating, and had gone out.

When Willie's heavy footsteps had died away on the smithy steps, a little silence fell in the kitchen.

"I guess you're wondering why I came, Jansie," Carl's voice was quiet as he began without preliminary, "Why I wanted to be here when Chris gets home."

Jansie gave him a straight look, "Maybe so," she admitted, "But don't let me push you into telling me anything you don't want to."

Carl leaned over and putting his forearms on his knees, studied his hands, "I came," he told her without pretenses, "To ask Chris to marry me."

Jansie looked at the bent dark head, "That ain't such a surprising thing to do," she said gently, "I gather you and Chris has been writing to each other all winter?"

Carl looked up to nod, "Yes, we have. And she told me about sending Jack away."

Jansie nodded, more in answer to the implication of his words than to the words themselves, "She's growed up a lot this winter, Carl," she said irrelevantly, and then, "Do you think she loves you?"

Carl flushed, "I have reason to think that she does. We've both grown up this winter, Jansie," his voice was humble, "If I had the last two years to live over, I wouldn't let Jack get near her! I'd realize that no matter how much money he had, he couldn't make Chris happy. I — I guess I've had to learn to fight for what I want." He grinned a little sheepishly.

Jansie grinned back, "Well, I ain't going to answer for Chris," she told him, "You'll have to find out for yourself one way or the other."

Carl stood up and his movements were suddenly restless and full of nerves. "That's what's getting me down!" he admitted ruefully, "When do you expect her home?"

"She ought to be here somewhere in the middle of the afternoon," Jansie told him, "They had their end-of-school program last night, and she just had to finish up and give out the report cards today. She hoped to catch a ride home with some of the folks in her community who was coming to this part of the county today." Then she added, with a dry smile at her own sentimentality, "I'm getting mighty anxious to see her! She ain't — hasn't been home since Christmas."

Carl walked up and down the small kitchen, glancing absently out at the well, then turned to Jansie, "I think I'll go for a walk," he told her restlessly, "It will help pass the time until she gets here. Where's a good place for a walk?"

Jansie looked at his neat suit and smartly shined shoes, "You'd just about ruin them — those clothes hiking around over the prairie," she remarked, "I reckon you'd better look at the town."

"I'll take my chances on the prairie," Carl grinned, "I've covered every street in town since my train got in this morning."

She watched through the kitchen window as he walked away, waving a friendly hand to the workmen at the well, then on, his strides long and free, to disappear over the swell of the prairie.

She went out to her garden with a thoughtful face.

She was weeding the phlox when a car stopped before the shanty and Chris' clear voice called thank-yous and farewells. Then Chris herself appeared, dropping her bag as she ran toward the garden, "Jansie!" she hugged the crippled woman, hoe and all. "I'm glad to be home!"

Jansie disengaged herself and laid down her hoe, "You look mighty sweet to me," her voice was happy on the words, "you look well, too, Chrissie! Ain't that a new hat?"

"It certainly is," Chris went to pick up her bag. "You like it? I got it last Saturday when I went to Cain with the Carpenters."

"Humph!" Jansie peered up at the hat, "I don't see why you didn't just get a red one!"

Chris giggled, "I got the reddest one I could find," she pouted, "I like it myself!"

They went up the steps into the kitchen.

But when they were in the bedroom, Chris laid the new hat on the bureau and turned to Jansie with serious eyes, her arms behind her. "Jansie," she said quickly, "I've told them I'll teach at Belling school again next year!"

Surprise flew across Jansie's face, "But why?" she asked, "I thought from the way you wrote—"

"Yes, I know," Chris stood frowning down at the toes of her shoes, "I am almost sure that I'll be offered Meade School next year." She looked up, "And you know how I'd have given nearly anything to have had it last fall. Mr. Hartwell practically promised it to me, and said he'd speak to the board, but—"

Jansie studied her, "But what, Chrissie?"

"I've got to go back to Belling again," Chris said, "My work there isn't done."

"They're drilling that old well again," Jansie said irrelevantly, "Maybe you won't want to teach nowheres, honey, if we get oil."

Chris went to the window and stood looking out at the rig. "It wouldn't make any difference, Jansie," she said slowly, and her voice reached for words to express her thoughts, "Even if they struck a gusher it wouldn't change my plans. I have work to do."

"Couldn't you do good work at Meade, Chrissie?" Jansie asked, "You could be just as good a teacher and be a lot more comfortable."

Chris smiled, "I know, Jansie," she said gently, and it was as if she were the older, older and more rigid in her standards, "But no one can do my work at Belling." Then she added in a lower tone, "Carl thinks I should go back if I feel this way."

"And since when," asked Jansie, smiling, "has Carl any right to be telling you what to do?"

Chris turned around, "Since this winter," she admitted, "I—I realized, when Jack came, how much I—cared for Carl."

"I see," Jansie said, "Then why, feeling that way, don't you just plan for that, Chris?"

Chris turned back to look out across the prairie, and there was in her face something that Jansie had not seen there before, a new sureness. "Because," she said slowly, "my own plans for love and happiness are not enough anymore." She hesitated, then went on, "Even though I do love Carl, there are still little Emmy and Jerry and the others, even the bad ones! And Jansie," she added, "I — I feel confident that Mrs. Hitchens has surrendered her heart to Christ!"

Jansie's dark eyes glowed with an answering depth of understanding, "So now you're under obligation to the whole tough bunch!" she said drily.

Chris grinned a little, "That's right, I guess. They've got me." She went over and sat down on the edge of the bed, clutching her fingers together in an earnest gesture, "You're always telling me that God has a use for everything that—happens to us, for everything that we must bear that we can't help. Well, that's my answer for this thing that Joe caused. I can do something for those people, especially the children of Belling, because I *am* Joe Sanders' sister!" Her eyes held the astonished dark ones, "They've let me stay because Joe is a sort of hero to them. Because the Hitchens and most of the other farmers are making bootleg liquor, and they think I'll stick by them. Oh," she halted a quick protest from the crippled woman, "They don't think I'm the bootlegger type," she laughed, "But they feel that I am one of them enough to stay there and teach their school."

Jansie looked at the girl with something like horror, "What do you mean, they think Joe is a hero?" her whisper was hoarse.

"Because he was shot to death by the law, they put him in a class with Jesse James and the Dalton brothers," Chris explained simply, "Why, Jansie, half the tales they tell each other and their children, half the songs they sing are about men like that!" She drew a deep breath, "That's why they offered me the job in the first place, I guess, and," she smiled at Jansie, "I suppose that I am the only human being on earth who has the strange combination of circumstances and the education to be able to do something for those kids!"

Jansie's eyes were sick, "Being the sister of an outlaw and a school teacher," she said bitterly. Her face was tired and old. "I wish you'd just a-run away when I wanted you to, honey," she added.

Chris reached out and touched Jansie's hand, "Being the sister of an outlaw and a school teacher, Jansie," she admitted, "And having behind me the long years of teachings, the subtle

training in the right and wrong of things, the joy of life and the sweetness of outlook that you've given me, too, I can give those things to the children of Belling. And now," she went on, "I can see my way clear to giving them Christ, too, I hope! All the rest has just opened the way for that."

Jansie's bent head came up and she studied Chris, "Yes, you're right to go back," she agreed, and then she added with a twisted little smile, "I reckon you're a woman now, Chris. I reckon you're grown up."

They sat together, the girl and the crippled woman, holding hands and saying nothing. But in that moment there lay for Jansie all the fruition of the years that lay behind.

At last, however, she raised her head and looked out the window, "I reckon you'd better be fixing yourself up a little," she commented to Chris, "Here comes that young man of yours."

Chris met Carl halfway to the knoll, and there was scarcely need for words between them.

When she had come up to him, Carl reached out his hands and she laid hers within them. They stood thus, smiling, and looking at each other for a long moment. Then, presently, they turned and walked together toward the knoll—two tall, quiet people. And there was in them a oneness already, as if their clasped hands were only a symbol of a deeper bond.

"I told Jansie about—us," Carl said presently.

Chris smiled, "I did too!"

And they laughed together.

When they were standing on the knoll and the prairie lay serene with spring before them and about them, Carl turned to the girl beside him, studying her face with his eyes. A new beauty lay over the old perfection of form and feature that had been hers through the months at Holden. This was the old Chris and the new Chris together.

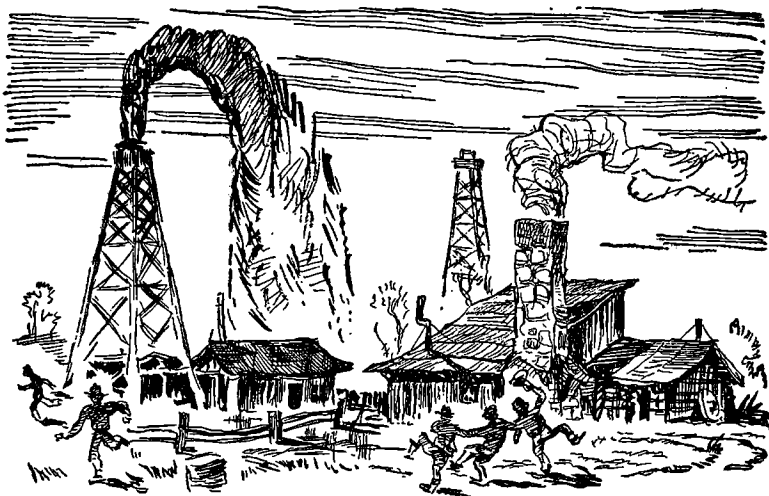
"I love you, Chris," he said simply and the words were strong and right between them.

"And I," Chris looked at him, and the hazel-green eyes were deeply serious, "And I love you, Carl!"

He put his arm about her and they stood, side by side, looking across the prairie toward the distant small hills, "We've always called those little hills the Blue Mountains," Chris smiled out of the tenderness that touches everything for one in love, "I always dreamed of them like—well—almost like Heaven, I guess."

Carl smiled in understanding for that dreaming little girl who had been Chris.

And the Blue Mountains lay before them, hazy and alluring, with all the ethereal enchantment of dreams.



28

JANSIE awakened in the gray dawn on the morning after Chris had gone back to Holden. The half-light of the morning lay dusky about her, and the shabby little room was sweet with the gentleness of dawn. Outside, somewhere, a rooster crowed, and the sound, nostalgic and haunting through the still air, touched like thin ghostly fingers the memory of all the years that lay behind.

But across the road, banging rhythmically in a sort of beating cadence, came the noises of the drilling well. Jansie lay, thrusting away the dry clank of tools, the bang of iron, pushing past them to the lonely crowing of the rooster and its whisper of the past. And as she lay, waiting for the full consciousness of awakening, there was within her a deep irritation at the well and the persistent demand of its clash and clank.

Presently, as she came more fully awake, she found the images of yesterday and of all the recent days, pressing for

her attention. Chris' beauty as she went about the house after Carl's visit, a ripeness of loveliness and born of the knowledge of love. Chris, laughing at nothing much as she packed her things for going back to Holden, and Chris reading aloud excerpts from Carl's letters, "'Darling—'" and her eyes had laughed shyly at Jansie across the top of the pages, "'Darling, go on and do the work that you want to do there at Belling. I love you for wanting to do it! And I still have that last sprint in law, but, honey, we can plan, can't we? Aunt Ennie says we must be married there in the old house. She says we will have the blessing of all the ancestors.' Oh, Jansie!" Chris had dropped the letter to turn dreaming eyes toward the crippled woman, "Imagine being a bride in that wonderful old house!"

In the clear moment of awakening consciousness, Jansie lay, knowing that Chris and Carl would be happy together. There was no deception, no cheating, between them. *And they are so lovely together*, she thought tenderly, *so perfect together*.

Then like a bell ringing somewhere in a mist, came the realization that she had had that thought before! *About Chris*, but it was only a breath, no more than a wisp of memory. *They are so perfect together*. That was the thought that had come to her that day, as Charles and Chris had walked away from the shanty together, off into the dusk of another summer. She'd been bitter and jealous of them in that moment. *I thought then*, she told herself with clarity born of this moment, *that Charles would love her. And I didn't want him to*. Now, as she lay motionless in the chipped old iron bed, she knew with all the depths of her inner certainty, that, more than any other possibility that might have come out of that day's relationships, she could wish now that that one had developed! *Then, I would at least have been able to be near him*, she thought humbly, *that would have been something*.

How disgusted Chris would be, she thought with a wry amusement at herself, *if she could know what I'm thinking!*

She'll be happy with Carl and I'm a selfish old woman to wish that it had been any other way.

She lay very still, her body pressed into the lumpy mattress as if by the firm pressure of a giant hand. Somewhere in the little house she could hear Willie's restless muttering and R. P.'s lusty snores, but she lay on, hating to get up. *I'm just tired*, she told herself, and remembered that she was a cripple. But even as she pretended, she knew that there was no more lift in her.

Outside the open window, she could feel the prairie, dim and unreal. Some sleepy bird whistled, tuning his throat for his morning trill, but there was no answering lilt in Jansie.

She lay looking about the bedroom, waiting for some invisible spring inside her to wind up and force her into action. *I'm like an old doll, all twisted and gnarly*, she thought grimly, *that has been wound up for a long time and now it's stopped. It can't go again, I reckon, because its spring is broken, the silly thing!*

With the ease of long-established habit, she muttered her thoughts aloud in her queer praying. "You can see how I feel," she told the Almighty, "I'm just run down, I reckon. Clean run down. Chris don't need me now, she'll be happy and so will Carl." And there was within her the certainty that Chris had come on her way now. That for Chris, things would be right. "I've worked hard to raise her, to get her past this time that she's had, and now," she sighed and looked wearily about the bedroom, "I'm wondering if maybe You ain't about through with me? Paw and Willie'd be all right. Paw can work enough to keep him and Willie in the little they'd need. A little something to eat and wear and they're happy."

She lay still, her eyes closed against the spreading morning, and quiet tears pushed themselves from under her closed lids. "If You can see Your way clear," she muttered softly, "I'd like to quit now. I've put up with this mess of a body for a good many years, and—I'm tired." And then, after a long moment of searching self-communing, she added reluctantly, "And it's *such* a long way to China!"

After awhile, she got up and dressed, fumbling impatiently with her own lameness. The night lights of the well across the road still gleamed and their shining was dulled by the brightening day. When she had dressed, Jansie stood by the window looking out, and her long hands, for once idle, were folded on the window sill before her.

The derrick stood tall against the sky, its harsh lines impertinent against the soft roll of the horizon. Behind it, in the distance, the Blue Mountains showed dark, their gentle curves broken and violated by the criss-crossing timbers. "You're an ugly old thing—" Jansie informed the well in her dry voice. "A-clanging and a-clattering over there all night long." She watched as a model-T sputtered to a stop beside the engine house, and a clean, overalled man got out, yawning and stretching. She watched, and somehow, the well seemed to be battering for her acceptance, to be making some demand of her, to possess a wilfulness of its own.

A dark figure moved about on the platform beneath the tower of the derrick, and the dry thump of tools came through the stillness. Still, Jansie stood watching.

The morning grew, and activity increased. A driller came out, rolling down his oily sleeves and dangling an empty lunch pail on three fingers. He passed a few words with the clean-overalled man, and each went his way.

It was morning.

As Jansie turned away from the window, the still mustiness of a night-deadened house met her. *Here I am*, she thought quietly, *like this shanty, old and about to fall down*. She went to the bureau and stood, gazing at her own reflection in the wavy mirror. For a long moment, she stood, staring with an unaccustomed concentration at her own face, studying it with unillusioned eyes. "It's been a long time," she said aloud, half in prayer and half in soliloquy, "It's been a long time in this ugly place!"

She looked about the room, thinking of Annie and Joe, and even of Chris, as a part of the memories now. She looked at a half-finished roll of her lace, and her eyes were indifferent. The years stretched ahead, with an endlessness of being, ugly

and dull, and with only a foolish old man and a half-wit boy. "Ain't You about through with me?" she asked again.

But, like the relentless tread of destiny itself, morning moved in on the world. Broad day was throwing conquering fingers of light across the prairie, threading ribbonlike between the beams of the derrick, gilding Jansie's wall. No matter how wide the reaches of darkness, no matter how weary the watches of the night, morning came, and with it, work to be done.

Jansie sighed, and, picking up her comb, withdrew her inner attention from her own image in the glass and absent-mindedly combed her hair. She pressed the strands into their places with steady fingers, and her face, as she turned toward the kitchen, was composed and usual.

Morning had come.

The day marched on, with its quota of seconds and minutes and then of hours.

Jansie did her work, quiet in the accepted ways of habit, moving about the shanty with her usual tread. But even stupid Willie sensed a strange, new thoughtfulness within the crippled woman, and his queer, half-wit perceptions quickened to resentful realization. "What's a matter with you today, Jansie?" he demanded once. "What you getting ready for?"

Jansie paused in her work and stood for a moment before she answered, her face somber with thought. "You, Willie!" she said with only a shadow of her old sharpness, "If anything was to happen to me, you'd better be a good boy for Paw. It'd make it easier for you."

Willie shuffled uncomfortably. "Ain't nothing going to happen to you, Jansie," he said crossly, and there was a thin blur of fear across his childish voice. "You got to take care of Willie. Paw ain't no good."

Jansie shrugged and turned away with something like resentment in the set of her crippled shoulders. "Paw's all right," she said almost defensively, as if she were arguing

more with herself than with the stupid boy. "You'd get along all right, both of you."

Unconvinced, and not understanding, Willie shambled away to the out-of-doors, leaving the crippled woman to her thoughts.

Presently, she finished her housework and went outside, too. There was within her some vague will to get her garden in shape. Outside the smithy door, she paused in the bright light of the morning sun, her face quiet toward the distant hills. The garden lay at her feet, thrifty and growing, its neat rows brighter than usual this year with more flowers. Driven by some inner compulsion, Jansie had planted flowers with lavish hands in the early spring hours, pinks, and marigolds, phlox and bachelor buttons. They made a brave array there in the sunlight.

But in her heart, she was telling them a misty goodbye. She picked up her hoe, and moved with slow feet down the small rows working the soil, uprooting a weed now and then, and praying a little. "I reckon You can see how little I got to live for, now that Chrissie is settled," she argued softly. "You can see," she paused, and her hands were still on the hoe handle, "You can see how it would be better for—even Chrissie, if—I was to go on. Then, she wouldn't owe nothing to the likes of us Sanders. She'd really be free." She bent again to her work. "I just can't see myself going down there to that fine house of them fine people and watching Chrissie get married. Me and my hunched back and my poor, trashy ways. YOU can see that," she muttered, almost in the tone of scolding Willie. "And You know Chrissie is too loyal to leave me out of her wedding. I reckon it's up to You to wind things up for me—right away, too," she added crossly.

And as she inched along, her hoe busy and light between the phlox and the onions, she knew that her determination and her petition were answered. A new sense of assurance came over her, and it was as if she heard a physical voice, answering.

Her prayer was answered, she was sure of that.

"Well, thank You," she said quietly, "I was sure You'd see what I meant."

She went on working, not even wondering when and how the Call would come, so certain was she of its coming. That was all that mattered. She'd be ready.

The sun rose higher, and began its drooping from the peak of the sky. Still the crippled woman worked on in her garden. It was a waiting, and, as she waited, she worked. Row by row the dirt was turned and smoothed and made neater. Inch by inch the busy hoe did its work.

Neither R.P. nor Willie came home for lunch, and Jansie scarcely noted their defection. Her hands moved faster and faster, and the sweat broke out on her body, seeping through the back of her dress in a dark stain. She did not know it. When she came to the end of a row, she did not look up, but with downturned face, hurried on to the next. The hoeing was finished and she turned to the plants themselves, snipping off a dead blossom with her long fingers, twining a curling tendril of bean vine.

Jansie was waiting.

When the hissing noise began, she looked up, knowing that it had come. The hissing seemed to fill the world about her. and wonderingly, she looked at the sky. But there was no storm, only the cloudless blue of the summer afternoon.

She looked about at the prairie, but all was as usual, and the Blue Mountains were in the distance. The world was not being shaken.

But the hissing went on.

Jansie laid down her hoe, and waited.

Her eyes were drawn to the well across the road. And even as she stood, looking, the hissing grew to a rumbling and then to a roar. A great, thick, black column of oil rose with a living gyration, with a seeming slowness, higher than the heads of the men running away from the well — up — up — to hang, a swaying dark shaft, shining with a dark gleam

in the sunlight, its feathery top higher than the top of the derrick.

Jansie stared at the phenomenon with startled eyes, then down at the running forms of men, at the hysterical excitement of Paw and Willie, who suddenly materialized before her.

"It's a gusher, Jansie, it's a gusher!" Paw's voice broke and squeaked on the shout. "We're a-gonna be rich!"

"Wheeeeel" squealed Willie, dancing up and down before her.

Jansie looked at them with troubled dark eyes, then back again at the wild well, and then, last of all, she looked down at the garden at her feet. The smiling flower faces were sprinkled with small, dark globules of oil.

"You know good and well," she muttered resentfully to the Almighty, "That that ain't what I meant!"

And with that remark, she laid down her hoe and turning, marched into the house.



29

IT was hot for September. Jansie shuffled from stove to table and back again, and, early in the day as it was, the beads of sweat gleamed on her upper lip. "I do declare," she said in a sort of conversational propitiation to R.P. and Willie, "It's so hot, I could almost wish that the summer would go ahead and end, and let the fall come on, much as I like summer."

Willie grinned in foolish acceptance of her friendly tone, but R.P. was not to be so easily mollified. He hunched lower over his plate and worked his bacon between his new false teeth with careful motions. "Don't you go and be trying to act like they ain't no hard feelings between us this morning, Jansie." He glared across the dim little kitchen at the crippled woman, "You ain't been doing me and Willie right, and you know it!"

Jansie came over to the table and set down a platter of eggs. Then, drawing up a chair, she reached for her own

plate. "All right, Paw," she said with an air of patience, "How much do you want this time?"

R.P. evaded the direct question, and came at her from another angle, his sense of grievance unsatisfied. "It ain't fair," he said plaintively, "Even if that lawyer did give you the rights over us about our money, it ain't fair for you to be so stingy with it!"

Willie looked up from his eating, his face hopeful, and nodded vigorous agreement.

Jansie's dark eyes were coldly brooding upon the wrinkled face across from her. "I ain't having no fun at it," she said briefly. "It ain't a bit of fun trying to keep these fellows from selling you everything under the sun!" She leaned forward and demanded in a hard voice, "How much do you want this time?"

R.P. squirmed, "I don't know exactly," he admitted. "I wish you wouldn't be so sharp, Jansie."

Jansie sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Look here, Paw," she said in exasperated explanation, "I'm not trying to get all that money for myself or something! All I've been trying to do all summer was to keep ever' Tom, Dick and Harry from selling you and Willie a lot of stuff you don't even want! That fancy plow, when you ain't even able to turn a garden spot! Those Indian blankets! And how about that red roadster that Willie bawled over for two days last month. It just ain't sensible!"

"You sent Chrissie some money," R.P. reminded sullenly, "And she ain't even got no legal rights in this here oil, like me and Willie has!"

"I know." Jansie's answer was a sigh. "I did send Chrissie a money present to cover the rest of her summer's schooling, and to pay a—little debt—she owed, but that's all. She ain't asking for nothing!" She sat wearily studying the faces across from her. "Look here, Paw," she leaned toward the old man, "I'm not relishing the job of managing all the money, and I'm more than willing to give it up!"

R.P. looked alarmed. "Now, now, Jansie," he whined, "You're doing all right. Them lawyers would—would mix

me all up, if I tried to deal with them. You're doing all right!"

Jansie sighed again and her dark face was troubled, "I ain't so sure I am doing so good," she stared down at her long hands, "It's a **burden**."

"We can buy things," Willie reminded her in a happy voice.

"Yes." She looked at him broodingly. "That is, you can buy some things, if they happen to be what you want. Well," she pushed back her scarcely touched plate and stood up. "I'd better be getting at my work! Mr. Shelton wants me to come down right after dinner and see him about that other well they're about to bring in."

"If I had that there red car I wanted," Willie reminded her in a reproachful tone, "I could carry you to town in it!"

Jansie grinned a little as she turned toward the bedroom. "That's right, Willie," she agreed amiably, "but since you don't have it, I reckon I'll just have to walk!"

Early afternoon lay hot on the prairie when Jansie appeared in the smithy doorway, wearing the same old best hat, and carrying the same purse, its tendency to fall open firmly checked by a rubber band.

She paused in the doorway and stood, looking out, and there was within her a deep dread of the errand before her. Mr. Shelton was so overpoweringly impressive!

Somewhere near the shanty a cicada shrilled his dry refrain, and, on the prairie, the drying grasses caught the passing shadows of the rainless clouds. Jansie glanced, with the indifference of habit, at the greasy darkness of the ground about the well across the road, and even the sight of the second derrick in the farther distance that was the Annie B. Sanders Number Two, failed to penetrate her absorbed concentration.

She walked slowly down the path that led to the shell road to town. And in her heart, she was agreeing with the two stenographers whom she had overheard talking just a few days before.

They hadn't meant for her to hear, of course. They couldn't have said what they had said if they had known that the

heavy, silent closing of the office door had not completed itself, behind the crippled form of the newest of John Shelton's clients. "Say, Frances!" Jansie had recognized the voice as belonging to the brilliant little brunette who sat near the filing cabinets in the big outer room of the lawyer's suite. "What do you suppose a little, old dried-up cripple like that will do with all that money?"

She had forced her feet to shuffle on, away from the clear young voice, but even so she heard the reply, "I can't imagine! There certainly isn't anything she could want, unless it might be more to eat or something like that!" The last voice had been followed by a peal of gayest laughter, then had finished, "But *I* could certainly use a little of that dough!"

That's just it, Jansie thought bitterly, as she walked toward town, *everyone in the world has some sort of use for money except me. How they love it, even Paw and Willie!*

And I, she thought wryly, *there ain't— isn't much that money can buy for me, except*, and her lips twisted, *maybe something fancy to eat.*

"I'm not saying You've made a mistake," she muttered softly as she walked along, "But right now, I can't see what You're up to."

It was then that she heard the childish sobbing beside the road.

For a moment, she thought it was just some game and her feet hesitated only briefly in their progress. Then, they stopped, for she saw that it was not a game at all.

Off to one side of the main road, on a wheel-tracked lane across the prairie, a little Negro boy lay on the ground, sobbing.

Hesitantly, thinking more about her own problems still, Jansie turned aside and walked through the tall grass toward him. "What's the matter, sonny?" she called gently, when she was near enough to make herself heard. "What's wrong?"

Perhaps not hearing her for the noise of his own crying, the child did not look up. Then, as she came nearer, she saw for herself what was wrong.

The horribly squashed body of a kitten lay in the wagon track.

Jansie knelt and pulled the heaving little child's body against her, "There now, sonny," she said clumsily. "Don't cry! It won't bring the kitty back!"

Startled at her touch, the little boy looked up into the wizened face above his own. He started to jerk away, then sensing something of the deep bond that lies between affliction and all suffering, he relaxed against her, sniffing. "It was one of them old teamsters!" he choked, "mashed my kitty."

"Shhhh!" Jansie's tone was troubled. "They didn't mean to hit your kitty!"

At her words, he turned hard, hurting eyes up to hers. "They did too!" he declared, and Jansie knew that it was true, that such cruelty had been enacted here upon the familiar prairie. "They done it on purpose." And then the child's voice went on with such a bitterness of hate that she winced. "They laughed, too, when I cried!" His voice was suddenly as old as heartache itself, as he added, "They wouldn't a-done it if I had been a white boy. They would'na dared!"

Sickened at heart, Jansie knelt there on the prairie, groping within her own bleakness for some comfort for the child. "I—I understand, sonny," she said slowly. "I ain't black, maybe, but—" she smiled gently down into the defensive eyes of the boy, "I'm mighty ugly!"

His eyes studied her. "Yes, you are," he admitted simply. "Don't you just hate folks, lady?"

Jansie smiled. "I used to," she told him. "I reckon I hated them about as bad as anybody could."

"What made you stop hating them?" asked the Negro child.

Then, slowly, and in a voice heavy with understanding, Jansie recounted for the ears of the only half-comprehending child the story of Jesus. Not seeing any incongruity in The Story and the harsh but insignificant fact of a dead kitten, she fumblingly unfolded in words the strange simplicities of the faith, of vicarious suffering and of spiritual comfort.

The child listened, his mouth half open and the tears wet on his cheeks, still sniffing now and then. And there was in

the husky gentle tones of the crippled woman something very comforting for the sore heart of childhood. "And so," she finished her recital, and her dark eyes were brooding with sympathy for the child and for the thing she was telling, "it don't make no difference what kind of a body you happen to have, He loves you. He's your friend."

But the hurt of all his short years lay behind the boy's voice as he asked, "I don't reckon He'd be no friend to a black boy, though," and there was in his tone a waiting, a not-accepting, "would He?"

Jansie knelt there in the prairie grass for a long moment before she spoke, and there was growing within herself a new acceptance as she groped for words of comfort for the boy. "Why do you think it's so much worse being black than like I am, sonny?" she asked. "People nearly run from me some-times, I'm so ugly, but He's still my friend."

The boy considered this with a deep seriousness. "I guess that's right, Miss," he admitted at last. "If He'd be friends with *you*, I guess He would with just about anybody!"

And when the child had gone on at last, Jansie stood for a while where he had left her. "I reckon I must have been talking to myself as well as to him," she said half aloud. "I reckon if God hadn't wanted me to have this crazy body to live in, He wouldn't have made me this way. And by the same token," she added, looking up at the prairie sky, "I reckon You must be wanting me to have all that money for some reason, someway, or You wouldn't have give it to me! I'll try," she said quietly, and all the rebellion was gone, "I'll try to do the best I can with what You've sent." Turning, she shuffled back to the road and headed once more for the town, and the lawyer's office.

John Shelton was a good lawyer for the oil country. A self-made East Texas boy himself, he had acquired a careful manner of bluff sophistication that set well with the self-conscious owners of brand new fortunes. He liked people, too, having an amused tolerance for the strange vagaries of the newly rich.

He understood his clients, generally, and helped them, in his own way and for a consideration.

But this one before him now had him baffled.

She sat there in the slanting autumn sunlight that fell on the richly polished woods of his office, as pathetically shabby as the day someone had sent her to him last spring. Her worn hat, with its drooping roses, was the very same, and her battered purse still fell open at the slightest provocation. Her dry-toned voice still held the same indifference to the wealth that had proved so exciting to the old man and the goofy boy. It was a queer situation.

"Of course, it may not be another big gusher like the Annie B. Sanders Number One," he was concluding his business with her, "But it looks good, Miss Jansie! It's beginning to look like you folks will have another good one, soon!" He paused and studied her, and she looked back at him, her dark eyes thoughtful. "Isn't there some little thing you'd like to buy, Miss Jansie?" the lawyer ventured, and the respect in his voice was for the pouring blackness of the wealth that had brought her to his office. "Couldn't I get you a little ready cash so that you can — well —" He smiled and leaned back, his face understanding, "Get the feel of having lots of money! You haven't bought a thing this whole summer!"

Jansie sat silent, her dark face unlightened by a smile. "Yes, there is," she said at last.

Here it came, at last! he thought with a sardonic sympathy, even this strange, ugly, crippled woman wanted something! John Shelton played a little game with himself at guessing what it would be, new clothes, a trip, even a new car. Something glittering, certainly.

But the hunchbacked woman sat still and silent again, after her answer. The moment stretched until it seemed endless.

"What is it you'd like to have?" the lawyer asked again, prompting her out of her seeming shyness. "Maybe it's something foolish like—" he grinned with a teasing twinkle in his eyes, "Like a few dozen pairs of black chiffon stockings, maybe, or a Paris hat!"

"Humph!" Jansie's long fingers touched the faded roses on her hat, and her dark face was contemptuous of him and his ideas. "I've got a hat!" she said shortly, then her face grew serious. "I was just trying to figure how much I'll need."

Rebuffed, the lawyer waited, but an anticipatory smile still played about his lips. This would make a good story over after dinner coffee, even the part about the hat. "How much do you want?" was the way he phrased it this time, thinking that she would be hard put to spend any great sum.

"I ain't certain," Jansie said slowly. "I ain't too good at figures. But as best I can figure it up," she went on, not noticing the lawyer very much in the absorption of her own thoughts, "I'll be needing about thirty thousand dollars."

The lawyer looked startled. "Thirty thous—! Well, I guess—" he recovered himself and his tone dropped, "it would take a little time—"

"You see," Jansie went on, out of her own deep thoughts, "I want to arrange to send ten missionaries out to a certain mission field in China. They're a-needing them out there, a friend of mine says. I want it done as soon as possible." She stood up, and John Shelton looked at the wizened little form with a healthy new respect.

"Yes, Miss Sanders," he rose to conduct her to the door, "I'll arrange for the cash, but how about the other arrangements—"

Jansie stood thinking, and there was about her a curious dignity; she seemed taller and more sure. "I reckon you'd better get in touch with the head of the seminary at Fort Worth," she instructed slowly. "He'll know how to go about it. I ain't much good at these things, but he'll tell you how it's done." She turned toward the door, then stopped, thinking again. And John Shelton, who had rather prided himself on his handling of woman clients, had the humbling sensation that she did not see him at all, that to her, he was only a good tool for her ends. "And mind," she said firmly, "You keep my name out of this, you hear?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the lawyer answered.



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THERE was a new quietness in Jansie as she walked back along the shell road in the late afternoon. She'd gone forward at last, taken a shuffling, reluctant step into the new way of life, and she felt the better for it. No matter how trying the days ahead might be, no matter which way the path led, the start was made. She'd go on, now.

The late sunlight lay long over the low town, then over the raw new suburban houses, and then over the vacant lots and the prairie itself, as she went toward the shanty. As she went, her busy thoughts rushed ahead of her, planning. *I reckon I'll have to do a few of the things that Paw and Willie are wanting so bad, she thought without rancor, maybe fix things up a little.* But the long prospect of the years with only the doddering old man and the foolish boy was grim before her. *We'll build us a nice house,* Jansie squared her shoulders and braced her soul against the years ahead, *maybe a good one, maybe even five rooms. They'd like that!* Her eyes specu-

lated upon the gleaming newness of the little houses along the road.

She paused briefly at the junction of the road with the path that cut away to the shanty, and reached into the leaning, weathered mailbox. She brought out a fat bundle.

There were the usual massed advertisements which were always so intriguing to the old man and the boy. But tucked away between a leaflet setting forth the merits of central heating, and a beautifully illustrated brochure from a famous jeweler on the subject of diamonds for the discriminating, there were two letters for Jansie herself.

She paused there in the pathway, with the sad wind of the late afternoon whispering through the dried prairie grasses about her, and her dark eyes studied the two envelopes.

One was from Chris, and Jansie squeezed its plumpness with an anticipatory pleasure and looked at the other.

She stiffened, and her heart thumped with a mingled sense of sickness and joy. For the second letter, as she could see from the well worn envelope and the foreign stamps, was from Charles Robertson.

It was the second letter she had ever had from him.

"I can't read it here," she said aloud, and looked about with eyes that were almost frightened. She wanted no audience when she read this letter, no matter what he had to say in it.

Turning, she made her way across the prairie, skirting the shanty yard and headed for the knoll.

When she had reached it, she stood, panting a little, not daring yet to open the letter. Before her, the dying grasses and the fading scrub-oaks gave a melancholy air to the landscape, as if she stood in a world grown older with the dying year.

Presently, she opened the letter, standing there to read it upon the little swell of ground. "Dear Jansie," she spelled out the words with laborious care, "I guess you wonder why I'm getting around to writing you again, after so long a silence! But if you could be here with me, you'd know how big beyond all telling, this job is—" Jansie looked out across the prairie, and her dark eyes were suddenly happy. *He'll be right sur-*

prised when they get ten new missionaries out there, she thought with delight, "And I have had a loss, a very serious loss, since I wrote last to you. Helen and Dil, my good friends and colleagues, both died this last year. I can't begin to tell you how it has hurt me, how much it has hurt the work. The climate here—" and the crippled woman went on to read the details of the thing that had happened. It was a strange tale in its way, a story of suffering and overwork and illness in an alien climate. And had she known it, it was a terribly familiar story, too, in the history of missions.

"And now," she turned the closely written pages and read on, her face hungry and eager, "Now, Jansie, I'm coming to the point of my letter. And as usual when people take their time about getting to the point, I want something—" Could he have heard about her money? she wondered suddenly. Could it be that? She read on, "Helen and Dil left a son, born just a few days before Helen died. He's a fine baby, and up to now, I've had him in the care of a Chinese woman. But it isn't a good arrangement, and I want to do better for him.

"The Jamesons have no close relatives who wish to take the child, and as you know, my own people are dead. Of course—I could send him back to a church orphanage, but, somehow, that isn't the thing I want to do for young Charles Robertson Jameson. (They named him for me before they died).

"Here, Jansie, is my proposition. I want to send him to you! Now, wait! Before you throw down this letter and start writing your refusal! Doctor and Mrs. Lang are leaving Shanghai late next winter to go back to take their furlough year in the States. They have offered to take the boy to whomever I decide to send him. I could take him to Shanghai and see him into good hands for the trip, and they would bring him directly to you, if you'll decide to take him. I'll assume the financial responsibility for his support, Jansie, which should make things a little easier for you in that way.

"After seeing the job you did on Chris, Jansie, I feel that of all the people I know back home, you are the one who is most suited to take a little missionary orphan and bring him up the way I want him to grow. I want him to have the prairie

to roam in, the Texas sunshine to seep into his bones, and Jansie's love and teaching to help him along! Think it over, Jansie, please, and don't answer until you are ready. He will be almost two years old by the time he gets to you next summer, and as I said before, I'll bear the financial load. It won't be riches, but it won't be dire need, either.

"Pray over this, and think about it, and write me as soon as you decide what to do. May the Lord guide you!"

"Your friend, Charles Robertson."

When Jansie had finished reading the letter, she stood, perfectly immobile for a long time. The sun dropped to the edge of the prairie, and hung, a golden world of fire, ready for extinction, and still the crippled woman stood, grotesque and immovable, trying to control the rising crescendo of her swirling emotions. Throughout the whole paean of her being ran one reaching note of delight, Charles had felt that she, out of all the people between here and faraway China, was most suited to bring up the child! It was the crown of favor from the man she loved.

There was no questioning within her of this thing that had come. It had come, and she would do it. It was before her.

At last, when the sun had gone, and the long, blue twilight dropped over the prairie, she drew a deep breath and squared her shoulders. She'd better be getting home before dark, as there was supper to get and a letter to write. The evening, and tomorrow, and all the days to come stretched busily before her. There was so much to be done!

But even as she turned toward the path that led down from the knoll, she turned back again and looked across the twilight prairie toward the distant line of the Blue Mountains.

There they were, the Little Hills.

Somehow, as Jansie looked at them, she knew, in that moment, something of their eternal quality, their inevitability.

Maybe they ain't so beautiful, she thought quietly, maybe God alone can watch them from a distance and see them, blue and sweet, according to His plan. Maybe when you get up

close, they are all mesquite, and sage and scrub! But they're there! God made them that way, and He must've had a reason!

And then, as she looked down at the letter in her hand, a surge of the eternal hopefulness, the immeasurable hunger-for-God that is the hunger of mankind, swept through her. *And maybe*, she thought with a twisted, sweet smile of wry grace, *maybe this one will be a mountain!*

THE END.